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ONE OF
THE BROKEN BRIGADE

BY
CLIVE PHILLIPPS-WOLLEY

AUTHOR OF "SNAP," "GOLD GOLD IN CARIBOO," ETC.

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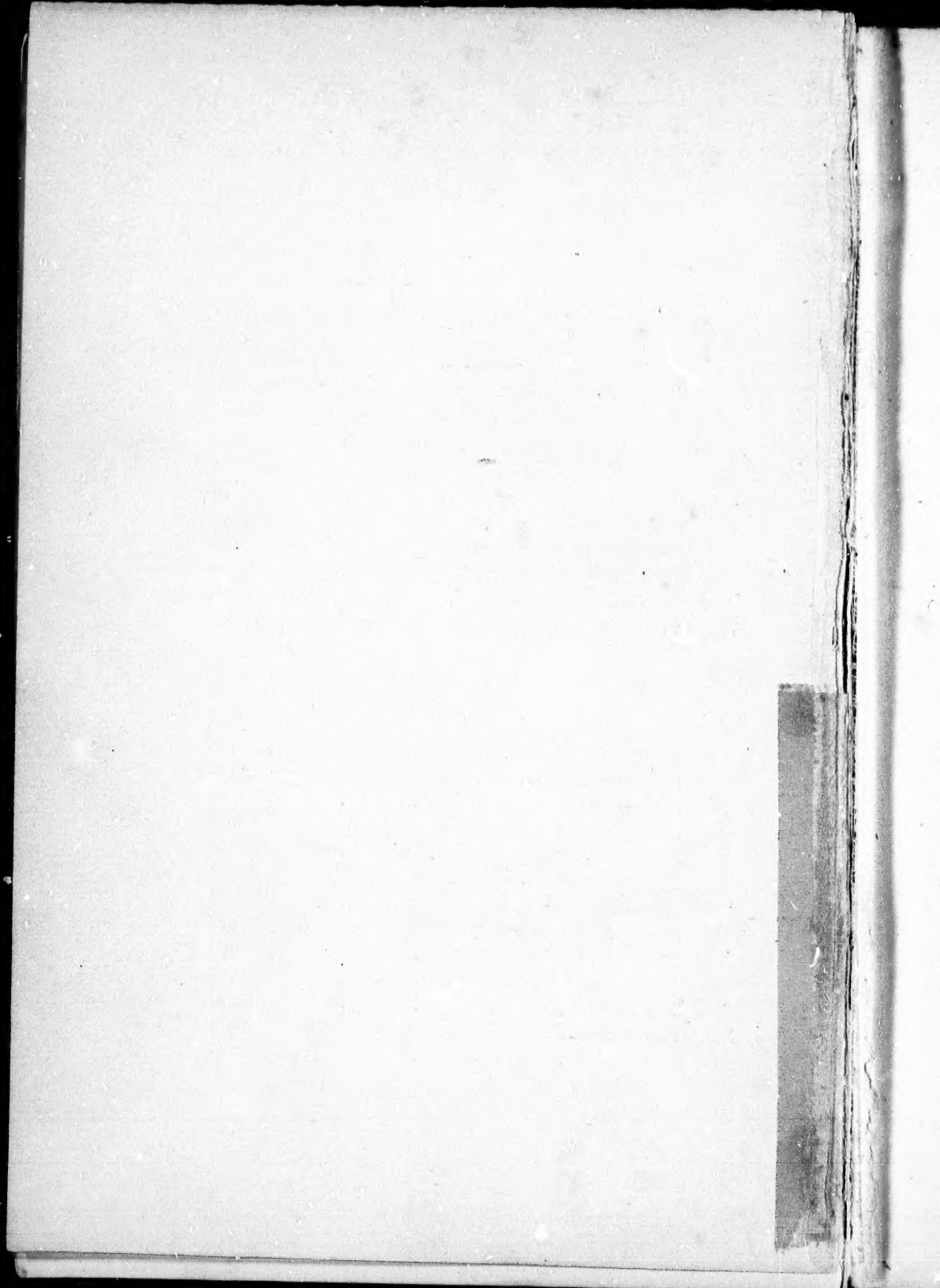
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PART I.

ONE OF THE BROKEN BRIGADE.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE "OLD COUNTRY."

It was night in the north-west corner of Berkshire, a night in late summer. The times of the cuckoo, of the early singing and building of birds, the times of primrose and daffodil had passed; the promises of spring had been kept, and the harvest which summer had ripened stood ready for the reaper. But the day's labour was over in the valley of the Thames, and a sweet sleepy hush rested upon the hazy water - meadows from which came already the fragrance of the new-mown hay. Nature had put her tired world to sleep, and the world slept well. Where old Squire Vervlam sat with his guests, at the window opening upon the Manor House lawn, it was so dark under the limes that a new-comer

would only have detected the other men's presence by the star-like points of their cigarettes.

Even when any of them spoke, which was not often, their tones were so low that they were barely audible above the whir and hum of the thousands of night moths greedily drinking the honied dew from the Manor House roses or darting about the great geranium beds. The only sounds worth mentioning which broke the sweet silence were the call of an owl, or the occasional splash of a heavy trout feeding in the darkness of the pool below.

Even the moon slumbered as yet, though by-and-by she would rise in her fulness and reveal to men the beauties of sleeping England. The whole atmosphere was charged with restfulness and peace, so that even the voice of youth was hushed in unconscious sympathy with the spirit of the time and place.

If any one had sought all the world over for a home for an Englishman to live in, for a corner rich with all the pleasures that a country life can give, he would have found no more perfect Eden than the valley of Kingdon-on-Thames.

There are lotus lands in the tropics where the colours of sea and sky and flower are more vivid than

any colours known in old Berkshire, where the scent of flowers is heavier, the growth of foliage more luxuriant, the earth a richer mother, and the sun a fiercer and more constant lover, but these lands do not suit English muscle and bone.

Everlasting sunshine saps the Anglo-Saxon's strength, and in time weakens the iron Saxon will, destroying the man's power to work even more effectually than the cruel cold and grey monotony of the far north, though that numbs the intellect and dwarfs the body. Undoubtedly Kingdon contained all that was best for the body of man, while not far down the beautiful historic river, rose the grey piles of the mother of modern learning, and further down, near its mouth, lay the world's mart, from which all news worth knowing, all things worth having, came almost hourly to the little Berkshire village.

At Kingdon a man might have rested content from the cradle to the grave, and yet what was it that was happening at the garden window on the banks of old Father Thames? Just that which has happened a thousand times in every village in our island; just that which has made our England the power she is. There in the soft gloom of a summer night in the

middle of the fairest farm-lands of his own county, surrounded by the best God makes of clay anywhere on earth, "the whisper" (as Rudyard Kipling calls it) had come to a young strong heart yearning for the lands "beyond the skyline, where the strange ways go down."

For a long time no one had spoken. The "old man," as every one (even his little daughter) called him, kept silently puffing away at his cigarette. As a rule, Mr. Verulam was sixteen, in spite of his grey hair, and many a practical joke set down to the credit of some schoolboy staying at the Manor should in justice have been credited to the squire. On the night on which this story opens the old man had lost his fun; he was really sixty to-night, not sixteen, and his eyes, as they rested dreamily on the dark pool below the river, had no sparkle in them. He was counting the cost, and half afraid of the venture, for he knew Noel Johns and his weakness as well as his strength; he loved the boy and was proud of him, with almost a father's pride; and though there had been times when he had been as enthusiastic as Noel himself, times when he had even told him that he would be a fool to go on struggling in the "man-

stified town," yet now that the eve of parting had come, he could only see the dangers ahead, only think of the six thousand miles which would soon lie between the boy and himself, and of the changes which the swift years might bring. The gallant craft was safe in harbour now; why should it tempt the dangers of the seas? The betting he knew was not all one way in Noel's case. Far from it. In the race of life he had enormous odds in his favour, and yet sitting there, in the dark, the old man could not help remembering that good looks, good education, a fine ear for music, a mellow voice, great skill in all games which Englishmen are proud to excel in; honesty, even, which could neither deceive nor (alas!) distrust, good gifts, though they be at home, are not all that a man needs in the colonies. Some of them might as well be thrown overboard at starting; and even the others, under favourable circumstances, may lead to the devil and the bankruptcy court as speedily as vulgar vices.

Suddenly Noel, who was lying outside on the lawn, put his hands to his mouth and emitted a long-drawn, lugubrious imitation of a wolf's howl. "Oo-whoo-oo-oo!" the cry went ringing down the darkness

of the river, and so unexpected was it that each of the party started from his dreams, and Pussy (Verulam's fair daughter), sitting in the French window by the lamplight, sprang to her feet and turned so pale that even the jester saw it, and apologized after his fashion.

"Why, Pussy, are you developing nerves?" he asked. "Who could have guessed it? If I had thought it possible to frighten you, I would not have been so stupid, but really I wanted to break the 'overpowering silence of the prairie,' don't you know; and that is quite the orthodox way to do it. It seems to me that I am likely to have my share of silence by-and-by."

"Well, if you don't like silence, shall I play to you, Noel?" asked the girl.

"Yes, play, Pussy. They have all lost their tongues to-night. Play some of our old favourites. Let me light the candles for you," and he went to the piano as he spoke.

"No, don't bother," she replied; "I know all your favourite songs by heart. I ought to. They were the first things you made me learn." And so saying, she sat down and touched the notes.

But though Pussy Verulam was only fifteen, a mere child still, she could not forget that her old playfellow was going to leave them that night; and the consciousness of this took all the music out of her fingers. Whatever was gay jarred on the stillness of the summer night, whatever was sad accorded too well with her own feelings, and when at last she found herself unconsciously drifting into "Where is now that merry party I remember long ago?" she closed the piano with an angry snap, and came away from it.

"Never mind the music, Pussy," said the old man, rousing himself to cover his daughter's retreat; "let us talk. Tell us exactly what you mean to do, when you reach the West, Noel."

"Give me just one more cigarette, little sweetheart, and I will," said Noel, and as he reached over the heads of the others to take one from the box she offered him, the light from the red flaming lamp fell upon her great grey eyes, and he could see that they were dim, whilst the hand which held the cigarette-box was as cold as if it were November instead of July. He knew this because he had been clumsy enough to touch that hand in taking his cigarette.

"Poor little playfellow!" he thought, "so there will be one sore heart when I am gone, but it won't do to make her sadder by letting her see how I feel the parting." And so thinking, when he had lighted his cigarette, he held it out at arm's length meditatively for a moment, and then replied in the chaffing manner which was second nature to him—

"Tell you just exactly what I mean to do out West! That is rather a large order, you know. Of course I mean to 'make my pile;' every good Britisher does; but *how* I mean to make it is a matter of detail which I've not yet considered."

"Then, Noel, I'm afraid I shall have to lay odds against your making that pile," said a handsome curly-headed fellow, lying back in the shadow. In features he was very like Noel Johns, but though a tall man, he was slighter, and not so deep-chested as that young Saxon.

"Do you think so, Cousin Trevor? Well, I can't bet on myself, for I've nothing to lose, and I can't expect you to back me because I know your opinion about my lack of 'business capacity,' but I'll take your good wishes, old chap, instead of your bet; and, after all," he added more earnestly, turning to old

Verulam, "I am beginning in the right way. In a country of such infinite possibilities, a fellow ought to go slow for a year or so; tie himself to nothing, but just keep his eyes open and his mouth shut. That is what Balmaine says, and Balmaine ought to know."

"Oh, of course Balmaine ought to know, and that is what the books say too," assented Trevor, carelessly; "but I must say that I should like to have my course a little more clearly mapped out, if I was in your place. Have you ever heard of a man, Noel, who really made money in the colonies except by a profession—learnt at home?"

"Of course I have, and so have you, Trevor, dozens of times. Six months ago you were as keen to go West, and as confident as I am. You would have gone too if you had not come in to Cowley," replied Noel, hotly. "Talk of men who have made money! Don't you remember Gurdon, or Balmaine himself, for instance?"

"Gurdon!" replied the other. "Yes, I remember old Gurdon, of course, but he made his money by pure bull-headed luck, and that was at the Cape too, in diamonds."

"I don't know so much about that bull-headed luck," retorted Noel. "Men who knew Gurdon at the Cape, say that when others drank up their first profits, he turned his diamonds into wages for more men, and lived himself on bread and water and hard labour. But, luck or no luck, it seems to me that a lump sum which produces an income of close on eight thousand a year is a good deal for any man to make before he is thirty. A quarter of that would content me."

"That is all right," Trevor admitted. "The few succeed, the many fail, though, Noel; and there are no diamonds in America, except on the ladies' fingers."

"And in the prominent citizens' 'dickies,'" laughed Noel. "But I am talking about Canada; I know nothing of America, and don't want to. Canada and America are not the same thing, you know, Trevor."

"Not yet, but they are going to be, are they not, Noel? We can't protect Canada from her big neighbour, even if we want to, and she certainly could not protect herself."

"I am not so sure about that. The big fellow

does not always win in a fight, and Canadian pioneers are not the men to chuck up the sponge in a hurry," replied Noel, who had a very warm enthusiasm for his Canadian cousins.

"Much the same breed as the men they would have to fight, are they not, Noel?" asked the old man, dryly. "I don't see myself why the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers should be inferior to those of Hudson Bay pioneers, and such like, or why the son of a man who has emigrated to the States should differ much from the son of one who emigrated to the North-West. Canada's danger is a moral, not a physical, one. If you allow your newspapers to draw their news, as they copy their style, from the Yankees, annexation will soon follow. Why, that blackguardly thing you showed me this morning could not even speak respectfully of Her Majesty, and assumed as a matter of course that its own premier was a thief."

"A thing like that doesn't represent the feeling of the people," cried Noel. "They are loyal enough, but 'ware politics and newspapers. I'm not going in for them, though Balmaine says politicians are the boys to fill their pockets."

"What did Balmaine do himself?" asked Trevor.

"Do you know his old 'governor'?" retorted Noel.

"Not well. I know that he had plenty of money, and used to let Percy see very little of it."

"Yes, and so Percy went West; and now it would make you cry with laughing to hear Percy talk of giving old Sir John a fiver 'to go on the tear with,' or 'to turn himself loose on,' as he sometimes puts it," added Noel, with a broad grin.

"Irreverent young cub," said the old man. "Did your friend learn his manners where he made his money?"

"Some of them, sir, I expect," replied Noel; "but his heart is all right. You ask Sir John if there is a better son in England than old Percy. That fellow would give up his clubs and break stones on the road to-morrow to get anything old Sir John wanted, if it could not be got in any other way."

"And are *we* to have 'fivers to turn ourselves loose on,' when our young Croesus comes back?" asked the Squire.

"Perhaps; or perhaps I shall play the game the other way, and put your fivers into some rattling

good thing out there, something out of which I shall get a fat percentage, and in which your money will stay. That's done too, you know, every day," he added.

"Yes," replied Trevor; "and that seems about as profitable a business as any I ever heard of out West, for a smart man; but you are not smart enough for that."

"Thank God!" ejaculated the old man.

"Yes, I suppose it's something to be thankful for; but, look here, if we talk dollars any more, Miss Grey-eyes will be asleep. What am I to bring you home, Pussy? A belt of wampum (don't ask what it is, dear), or a collar of grizzly claws?"

"Are there grizzlies where you are going, Noel?"

"Why, of course, my dear," Trevor answered for him. "Doesn't your supreme innocence understand that wherever business is brisk, and a steady young man likely to do well, there grizzlies abound?"

"Don't chaff," replied Pussy, with spirit. "I know as well as you do that grizzlies don't live in cities; but Noel won't have to work all the time, and if he thinks bears more interesting than dollars, I'm sure I agree with him."

"You would not be a Verulam if you didn't. I wonder if any of our family ever guessed that fences were not put up only to be jumped? I doubt it. We certainly," added the Squire, "are not a practical money-making people, we English country gentlemen."

"Don't blaspheme against sport, sir," Noel protested. "It is not the only thing worth living for, I grant you, but it is better than money-grubbing. If there was no sport to be had in America, there would have been mighty few Englishmen developing it to-day. It is the love of sport, or something uncommonly like it, which makes Englishmen colonize at all."

"Perhaps; but our fellows get almost as badly done over the sport as they do over the dollars," said Trevor. "I don't believe the sport is half as good out there as it is at home. I never met a fellow yet, who had been any time out West, who was fit to fill a butt on a decent moor; and, upon my honour, I doubt whether the stalking is as good out there as it is at home."

"Don't know, I'm sure. I've never tried either, and you have only tried one; but whatever you do

out West, you've got to do for yourself, Trevor, and that is worth a good deal."

"Well, you may be right, and America may be all you think it is," replied his cousin; "but I'd stop here even now, if I were you, old fellow. England's good enough for me."

"Good enough for you!" cried Noel, hotly. "Good enough for you! Yes, she is good enough for me, too, or for any sane man, God bless her! It's my balance at my banker's which isn't good enough for her. But what is the good of talking? All that was settled long ago."

"But why couldn't you farm here, just as well as there, Noel?" asked the old man.

"Because a younger son's place is not on the family acres," replied Noel.

"And why not?" asked the Squire.

"Why not? Why," replied Noel, "because *you* say so; yes, you and thousands like you. I might stay and work at the bar, if I had patience enough. I might go into the army if I had money enough. I might stay and live upon my people if I was mean enough, and I might go into business, or farm for profit, if I was not a Johns of Kingdon.

You would think it rather plucky of me to 'run a store' in the North-West, but how would you like it if I sold groceries in the village?"

"No," he added, after a pause, "our places in the world are different, Trevor, and I don't grumble. You two have the best country in the world to live in, but it is ready-made. I shall have the fun of helping to make a country for myself. Our forlorn hope has its charms. Now, Pussy, give us just one more song before you go to bed. You don't mind her singing 'Auld Lang Syne,' sir, do you?"

"Of course not, of course not, boy," cried the Squire; "good heavens, is it so late already?" And rising, the four joined hands, and sang together that old song which is a sacrament to some of us, pledging themselves for all years to come to the friend who stood on the brink, waiting to step out from the light and warmth of home into the battle of life in the Far West.

For a moment all stood, hands joined, listening as the last notes floated down the dark river; then the old man wrung the young one's hands in both his, and, turning, said somewhat hoarsely to his daughter—

"Now, Pussy, bed! It's time for chicks to be at roost. Will you get her candle for her, Noel?"

So Noel Johns went out for the last time into the old familiar hall with its black panelling, and cases of rare birds, not a few of which he had himself shot, and its bough of mistletoe, still left hanging by common consent, as a souvenir of the merry romps of the last Christmas, and there, at the foot of the stairs, bade good-bye to Pussy Verulam. They had been playfellows and neighbours all their lives. She had been a dear little chum to him, and he a loyal squire and helpmate to her in every sport and every mischief she had fallen into since nursery days, but that was all. On this summer night the two were merely boy and girl, but as she stood in the lamp-light, bidding him good-bye, the boy realized what an exquisitely lovely woman this child-friend of his must grow into.

Perhaps old Verulam's thoughts instinctively followed the boy's, for he said suddenly, "Kiss her, Noel. Perhaps it's the last chance you'll ever get. Pussy may not be our Pussy any longer when you come home again."

Nothing loth, the boy did as he was bid; kissed the sweet young lips held up to him, and felt a thrill flash through him and his eyes open, so that

he went away with a new knowledge and a new sorrow. America might hold a fortune for him, but England would still hold Pussy Verulam.

He was too wise to dream that sweet Pussy could ever be a younger son's portion, but for the first time he realized the bitterness of being "only a younger son," with his way to make in the world, and with no time even to dream of great grey eyes and sweet girlish lips for many a year to come.

Just at the last he felt that he envied his cousin Trevor, not because he was the Squire of Cowley, but because, being the Squire of Cowley, he had a right to come to Kingdon whenever he chose, a chance which poor Noel now thought the best chance in the world.

After Pussy had gone to roost, the men went back for a whisky and soda, and one last pipe. Pipes always appeared at Kingdon as soon as the ladies went, for, to tell the truth, the Kingdon men were such Goths that they only tolerated cigarettes when they could get nothing more substantial to smoke. That last whisky and soda seemed as difficult to finish as the widow's cruse of oil, and the full moon was high in the heavens when Noel's dogcart came

round to the hall-door; and even then no one was ready to say "good-bye."

However, the words of farewell had to be said at last, the horse's hoofs rattled along the drive, the lights from the open door vanished, and the shadows of the big limes swallowed the wanderer up.

Along the road home, Noel passed a score of old familiar landmarks. The white posts round the village cricket-field reminded him of many a game in which he had been Kingdon's hero. Trevor was a good man all round, and a popular one too, but the younger cousin had always been a turn the best of the two at all English games, and the village knew it and loved him for it. A yokel whose voice he knew, but whose face he could not see, gave him good night, and Noel's heart went out to him though he knew that at that time of night his well-wisher was most probably a poacher who had been out after the Cowley rabbits.

Ah, well! just then Noel Johns would have preferred a Kingdon poacher to a New York millionaire. Anything that belonged to home was dear to him, now that he was saying good-bye. But nothing stops in this world, and Noel's horse was

among the least likely things to stop, at any rate, at that time of night, anywhere between Kingdon and his own stables, so the old familiar scenes flitted rapidly past him, just as our lives will in the last hour, and after he had once reached home he remembered nothing clearly. There was a turmoil of packing, a rush of trains, and then Liverpool and the great Atlantic liner, with its mob of strange people on board, homing Yankees and inquisitive globe-trotters, and, above all, that spirit of gambling which seems inseparable from anything that has once been in contact with the other side of the herring-pond.

On board Noel was an immense favourite (such as he always are), and soon, that jade Fortune set her cap at him, for, being foolish enough to dabble in speculation on the run of the ship, he won enough to pay his passage, and to strengthen the already growing conviction that the dear old fogies at home were (as his Yankee friends told him) "too conservative in their ideas about money," which, after all, was easy enough to make, if only you had pluck enough to try for it. Of course he wrote home from Merville and from Montreal, but, after that, Kingdon heard very little of its fledgeling. At one time he was staying with

friends whom he had picked up on the boat, people who had taken a fancy to him, and who, it was hinted, were about "to put him into a very good thing." From subsequent letters, it appeared that this very good thing was somewhere very far west, for the postmarks came ever from further and further away, until at last they had reached the edge even of the great American continent, where it seemed that Noel had temporarily settled down on a ranche, and was engaged in growing—well, no one seemed quite to know what he was growing. He never was a good correspondent. Young men are not as a rule; and no one blamed him for his silence. His half-yearly remittance was always sent to the same address—"Post-office, Victoria, B.C."—and the remittance was always acknowledged, and no extra money ever asked for, so that those who believed in him looked for his speedy return as a second young Balmaine. But the old man doubted, and at the end of nearly three years, he astounded his whole family circle by proposing that, for once, they should give up the September partridges, start some time early in June, and go for themselves to see "what that place Canada really was like."

CHAPTER II.

IN THE CITY OF SUNSHINE.

It was June in Vancouver Island, and Trevor Johns, who had come over with Mr. Verulam and his daughter Pussy, to whom Trevor had now been engaged for nearly a year, loafed down one of Victoria's main streets, and entered the den of a real estate-agent, a place with almost as much plate-glass about it as a London gin-shop, and very nearly as dangerous to its *habitues*.

"Come in, Johns, come into my room, and have a cigarette," said the owner of this gorgeous office. "I think I've fixed that Shawnigan business."

The speaker was a man of the fair German-Jew type, not bad looking, but for an unpleasantly artificial smile of which he made constant use, and with manners of that peculiar polish which suggest the London music-hall. But Mr. Jacob Snape passed

muster well enough where he was, and his English clothes, and a certain affectation of unbusinesslike frankness, made some poor fools all the more ready to trust him.

"Come in," he continued, "and sit down," closing the door behind his guest as he spoke, and carelessly turning a lot of papers face downwards on his desk. "I've made a couple of thousand dollars on a deal this morning. It's not much to a millionaire like you, but it's pretty good for a poor beggar like me, and I think it deserves a cigar," and so saying he chose and lighted one, leaving half a dozen clients (poor devils who wanted to borrow money rather than lend it, or who had come for the interest on their investments) to kick their heels at their leisure outside his counter.

"Mr. Snape," his clerk said to them, "was busy." And so he was, and his business this morning was a very remunerative one, though a tenderfoot would not have understood that at first sight.

"Two thousand dollars!" ejaculated Trevor, who was more fond of money than such a good sportsman ought to have been. "Why, that is four hundred pounds! Four hundred pounds made in a morning's

work! I wish I knew how to make money as easily as you fellows do."

"Oh, *you* don't want money. You came out here for your health. I didn't; and, besides, we don't do that every day, though, of course, in a place like Victoria, any fool can do it pretty often, and a man must do, to live as men live here. But hang the business; let us talk about our fishing-trip. The missus is going, and that pretty Miss Gilchrist, and a couple of naval fellows, and I've arranged with a rancher on the lake to let us have his house to sleep in, and his boats to row about in."

"That seems excellent," remarked Trevor. "How about provisions?"

"Oh, I've sent up the liquor, and I'll see to the grub, and as there is nothing very pressing to do in town just now, we'll start to-morrow, if Mr. Verulam and his daughter can be ready in time."

"The Verulams can be ready, and I know they would like the trip; but I'm afraid, Mr. Snape," replied Trevor, hesitatingly, "that you are taking a very great deal of trouble for comparative strangers."

"We don't treat *Englishmen* as strangers here,"

retorted Snape, "unless they wish us to; but say the word. Will you come?"

"Certainly, if the Verulams will, I will; but who's to do the cooking? Shall I hire a Chinaman?" asked Trevor.

"No, that is not necessary; Jones the rancher will cook, and wash dishes, and do all that sort of thing."

"But," asked Trevor, "isn't that rather imposing on the unfortunate Jones? No doubt he would do it for you, but he hasn't even seen us yet, and we shall be a big party."

"So much the better for Jones," replied Snape, easily; "I'm hiring the fellow, and of course he'll make me pay for what he does. It will be a big bonanza for him. Ranchers are not all quite what you fancy out here. This fellow is a type of one class. He was a sort of mud-student, who fooled his money away here for awhile, bought a place to clear and exist upon, and is now what we call a remittance man."

"A remittance man?" asked Trevor.

"Yes, isn't that good English?" replied Snape, laughing. "It means a fellow who doesn't know

any trade, and won't learn one ; who lives on beans and bacon when he can't kill a deer ; goes out to carry a surveyor's chain in the summer, and in winter hibernates amongst his logs, or, if in town, hangs around the post-office all day, looking for letters from home. They are a confounded nuisance to us, always wanting loans, and never able to pay interest——”

“Poor devils !” muttered Trevor, sympathetically.

Snape looked surprised for a moment. The comment struck him as odd. “Well, yes,” he added after a pause, “I don't suppose that they *do* have a very good time, and yet some of them put on a hell of a lot of side, wear knickerbockers in Government Street as if this was a village, and fancy themselves a good deal better than the men they borrow money from.”

“But how do they come to grief in the first instance ?” asked Trevor.

“Oh, Lord knows,” replied Snape, impatiently. “Hang the remittance men. Let us go up to the Jarvises' tennis-party. We shall meet every one worth meeting up there, and then we can arrange about to-morrow.”

Trevor, having nothing to do, assented, and calling one of the only two hansoms in Victoria, Snape put his friend in, and the two drove off, leaving the unimportant clients still kicking their heels at his counter. Of course the hansom would cost our real-estate man a dollar, and the tram-car would have taken him nearly to his destination for ten cents, but when you are playing some games it pays to play all through *en prince*; and, besides, what does a beggarly dollar more or less matter in Victoria in boom times, when every train from the East brings over fresh consignments of nice plump British pigeons ready for plucking?

The Jarvises' tennis-party was a weekly function, and one at which a stranger certainly would see B.C.'s capital at its best. Victoria, of course, is a young town, and houses in it which have been houses for as much as five and twenty years are rare, but in five and twenty years assisted nature can do a great deal on the Pacific slope, and there was no trace of unpleasant newness, no raw stumps still standing about the Jarvises' grounds. On the contrary, the house itself was veiled in luxuriant creepers, the fruit trees were well grown and lavish of their

fruit, and the lawns were as perfect stretches of firm green velvet as you will meet with anywhere. Standing at the top of the rise by the house, you could see the sea sweeping all round you, not a grey monotonous expanse of water, but a gulf of blue, flashing and alive with sunlight, dotted here and there with wooded islands, and backed on two sides by the white peaks of the mainland. In the nearer distance were gardens full of blossom, and just beyond them, again, a framework of dark sweet-scented pine woods. The whole landscape suggested rest and repose, and amongst the people on the Jarvises' lawn there was an air of wealth and ease in pleasant harmony with their natural surroundings. Nature meant Victoria for the Brighton of the Pacific, but some among its foolish inhabitants will not have it so, and, unfortunately, that speculative fever which is the curse of America, has taken root and spread even in this garden of Eden. This, of course, is inevitable. Speculation is in the very air of the West, and wherever Americans come it is rife. And there were Americans from Seattle, from Tacoma, even from their beloved "N' York," upon the Jarvises' tennis-lawn when Trevor

reached it, and it was to one of these, a tall blonde, handsome enough to make men stare even in Dublin, where pretty women are the rule, that his friend first introduced Johns.

"Miss Gilchrist," he said, "let me introduce my friend, Mr. Trevor Johns."

"What is the gentleman's name?" demanded the beauty. "Oh, Mr. Trevor Johns! Pleased to meet you, sir," and she held out a cordial hand to him; and then to Miss Verulam who had also come up and been introduced by Snape, "Miss Verulam! Pleased to meet you, ma'am. And what do *you* think of this little city? A daisy, ain't she?"

"I beg your pardon," replied Pussy, not following the drift of what her new friend said.

"Miss Gilchrist wants to know if you don't think our little city a daisy," interposed Snape, with a smile. "A daisy is our phrase for anything we admire very much. Miss Gilchrist, for instance, is our daisy just now."

"Now, Mr. Snape, none of your sauce!" retorted the lady. "Oh, here's parper and marmer! Marmer, let me introduce Miss Verulam and Mr. Johns. Mr. Johns is a capitalist come out to

invest in our western world, I reckon. Isn't that so, Mr. Snape?"

"No, I assure you, you misjudge me," replied Trevor. "I know nothing of business, and am only here for pleasure."

"You can't play that off on me, Mr. Johns," replied the girl slyly; "but, there, I won't give you away. Catch our business men asleep if you can!"

It seemed hopeless to protest, so Trevor changed the subject by asking her if she played tennis. "Why, certainly," she replied; "I just dote on it. Shall we play? I see Miss Jarvis wants two more over there," and, as Trevor promptly assented, she turned to her mother, who stood near, a dutiful parent laden with many encumbrances, and relieved her of a racquet, replacing it with a light wrap, and one or two other things not essential for active exercise. After borrowing a hairpin or two, and generally fixing herself up, she announced her readiness for the fray.

At the end of that sett, Trevor was of opinion that the old lady might just as well have kept the racquet. He was not very much of a player himself, but knew enough of the game to understand that

dresses from Worth's, with long tails to tumble over, were too much of a handicap for any woman's skill. However, when the game was over, his partner's appetite for fruit and ices appeared to have benefited by the exercise, and at least she had one advantage over a party of genuine English girls, who had been playing a really spirited game in the next court; for whereas they, poor things, looked decidedly hot and tumbled, Miss Gilchrist's complexion was still unflushed, her dress in no disorder, and her general appearance as unimpeachable as that of a model from Bond Street.

In the breathing spaces between strawberries and cream, Miss Gilchrist began to talk again.

"I guess you are quite new to this coast, Mr. Johns?" she remarked.

"Yes, quite," he replied. "I have hardly been here a week yet, but it seems longer. I know so many people already."

"Ah, I dare say that's so," assented the girl. "Every one here is very pleasant and 'social.' Parper saw your arrival in the 'personals' in the *Colonist*. Are you any relation to Mr. Trevor at Portland?"

"No, I think not," he admitted. "I'm afraid I am so shamefully ignorant that I hardly know where Portland is."

"Nor to our Mr. Jones of Seattle?" she persisted.

"No; but then, you know, there are so many Joneses in the world." He did not like to remind her that his name was not Jones, but Johns.

"That's correct," she answered; "but our R. P. Jones of Seattle is a very prominent citizen. Made quite a pile, too. He's in the hardware business."

Trevor Johns gasped. What would Kingdon have thought, he wondered, of a Trevor Johns in the hardware business at the place with the awful name? But he was wise enough to conceal his thoughts.

"You say '*our* Mr. Jones,' Miss Gilchrist. Do you mean by that that your home is at Seattle?"

"Yes, you bet it is. Parper is in business there. Now, Mr. Johns, there's a city! You *should* see Seattle!" she replied with enthusiasm.

"Why," he asked, "is it so very beautiful—better than this?"

"Well, I *should* say so," she replied, putting down

her plate, and drawing on her gloves; "this little town ain't a circumstance to it. Why, there are more four-story blocks in one street in Seattle than in the whole of Victoria—and *brick* blocks too!"

"Yes, I suppose it must be a very fine city," murmured Trevor, feebly. His ideas were getting somewhat muddled. This young woman was certainly too many for him, and it really did require an effort to realize that the number of brick blocks in a city had anything to do with enhancing its beauty.

"A fine city! why, it's the queen city of the Sound. That's what Seattle is right to-day, with electric lights and tramways, and telephones to all the residences, and everything just humming. But say, Mr. Johns, I wouldn't like Mr. Jarvis to hear us, but doesn't Victoria seem just a little sleepy to you? Kind of mossy, don't you know."

And so this peri of the West babbled on, until Trevor felt, when he left her to talk to some of his other acquaintances on the lawn, that if Seattle had many more such enthusiastic daughters, the queen city of the Sound would stand in no need of

advertising pamphlets. This is one of the strongest points in your genuine Western American. To him or her there is only one city in the world worth mentioning, and that is the one he belongs to; and his loyalty to it, and his efforts to make it known as "the hub of the universe," in season and out of season, are beyond all praise.

And meanwhile Pussy Verulam had had a very good time indeed. At first she had fallen into the hands of some real "mossbacks," British Columbians of the old Crown Colony days, charming people who had kept their insular prejudices, perhaps, and had let the world go by them without making the most of it from a business point of view, but who had kept other things better worth having than their prejudices, and had enjoyed to the utmost the beautiful world around them, its sport and its country pleasures; people who had perhaps been something of a drag on the runaway coach of colonial ambition, but a very useful drag for all that, which had possibly saved the coach more than once, when it might have come to grief downhill.

To one of these, a Mr. Esmond, she had said after a while, "Why, Mr. Esmond, you know yours

is almost a Kingdon name! We have Esmonds living not ten miles away from us at home."

"At Lycot," he answered. "Yes, those are my brother's people. He died some years ago, but his second son Charley, oddly enough, is here to-day.— Ah, Charlie!" he cried, and a bronzed, hard-looking young fellow, who was passing, stopped in the middle of his chaff with a brother naval officer, and came across to the group exclaiming, before his uncle could introduce him, "Miss Verulam! What luck! Don't say you've forgotten me and last year's Henley, and all the fun we had there?"

"No, I've not forgotten you," she answered, laughing. "I'm afraid, Mr. Esmond, that none of the people on that house-boat will ever forget you. He was the most inveterate practical joker," she added, turning to the elder man, "and the greatest tease in the party."

"Oh, come, that's cruel!" he replied. "When a young man makes good resolutions, and starts fresh in a new world, his past should be held sacred. But come and let me show you the lions, in token of forgiveness. I know them all, and they'll all be quite civil to such a beautiful Una." And so saying,

the unblushing mariner made fast his prize, and sailed away with her in tow, as if she belonged to the ship. Nor was Mr. Esmond's the only familiar face which Miss Verulam saw on the Jarvises' lawn that day. And with the middies, shrinking somewhat from the overpowering presence of their senior officers, she discovered the son of a parson whose church was almost within sight of her own home, while two of the civilians on the lawn came up and claimed her as an old acquaintance in the ball-room and in the hunting-field.

These men of course had come out to shoot something later on, and the worn trout-flies in their caps proclaimed that they had already been busy with their work of destruction.

"Is it not a tiny world, after all?" she asked of her companion. "Here are we, six thousand miles from England, and I declare that there are almost as many people I know on this lawn as I should meet in an afternoon drive round Kingdon."

"Yes, there seems to have been quite an exodus for your special benefit," replied young Esmond, demurely. "What are you looking surprised at? 'Exodus'? Oh, 'exodus' is all right. Mrs. Balley

calls it so, and she's quite the most 'prominent lady' I know."

"I won't have you chaff Victorians," said Pussy, shaking her racquet at him. "I'm in love with them already."

"I dare say; so are we all," he replied; "but may we not laugh at them a little sometimes? They do at us very freely. For instance, as I came down Government Street to-day, a rude little boy wanted to know 'if they was for wading up stream in.' 'They,' Miss Verulam, were as smart a pair of knickerbocker breeches as ever walked into Faringdon."

Pussy laughed, and then after a pause asked him, "Are you not one of the party which goes to Shownigan to-morrow?"

"Entirely at your service," he replied, with much submission.

"Thank you, but I think I can take care of myself," she replied.

"And therein you disagree with the supreme organizer," he retorted; "for, in his wisdom, he has provided two men and a fraction for each lady."

"To which class——" she began mischievously, and then added, "but perhaps I had better not ask."

"No, decidedly you had better not ask. A flag-lieutenant is not a person to be unceremoniously sat on. There's a subject for you to reflect on," and with a merry laugh he raised his hat and left her.

The whole of that afternoon was as beautiful as a dream and as sparkling as champagne to Pussy. As hosts Victorians leave nothing to be desired. Every one seemed bent on pleasing, and everything lent itself to pleasure, while what struck the visitors most was that every one in the province seemed able to take a holiday.

The Jervises' tennis-party certainly was not the only one in that month or even in that week. There would be at least two like it, every day throughout the season; and yet at it were judges, and advocates, and business men of all sorts.

Every one seemed to have made a fortune and to be bent on enjoying it, and Pussy, though only a girl, could not help wondering where the working bees were, and what were the factories, trades, and callings from which all this wealth flowed.

Were there no people, she wondered, who had still work to do and money to make in this wonderful "City of Sunshine"? She supposed not, but if money-making was so easy here, why was Noel not here to meet them? Surely he had not gone by this wonderful place. And yet, though they had made a good many inquiries about Noel Johns, they had obtained no news of him as yet. Trevor opined that he would "bob up serenely" before very long as a fabulously wealthy person in the hardware business or as boss of a dry-goods store; and, at any rate, it was no good to worry about him, and so they all drifted as every one drifts in the deliciously lazy West, boating on the Gorge by moonlight, supping at the Poodle Dog, being made much of by the "sailor men" at Esquimalt, and more or less forgetting their quest.

After all, it did not matter much for a month or two. In a place like British Columbia, no one could possibly come to grief, much less such a fellow as Noel Johns.

CHAPTER III.

THE HIRED MAN.

EIGHT o'clock in the morning is an early hour for some ladies, to some even an unbecomingly early one, but ten minutes before that time Pussy Verulam, her cheeks aglow with the soft sea-breeze, and her great grey eyes full of swiftly changing lights and shades, paced gaily up the platform of the E. and N. Railway Station. Trevor and her father were with her, of course, but the rest of the party were late, and in spite of a chorus of wild feminine shrieks, barely induced the officials to wait long enough for them to bundle themselves and their belongings into the hindmost carriage of the train. The early rising and final rush had had a bad effect upon Miss Gilchrist's nerves. For once she was distinctly snappish, and her fair hair had none of that coquettish crispness in its little curls to which her admirers were accustomed. "Picnics,"

she opined, "didn't ought to begin until along about the middle of the day, same as they did at Saratoga and lake George, and such places." However, luckily for her, the main part of the male contingent was not to join the train until the next station, and before that had been reached she had exerted her fascinations upon the guard to such good purpose that she obtained sole use of the baggage-car for half an hour, and disappeared into it with a mysterious dressing-bag. When she reappeared, the syren was herself again; her colour had returned, her curls were as crisp as ever, and her temper as sunshiny as the morning. Like his daughter, the colonel—of course Gilchrist was a colonel as well as a financier—seemed to have left some of his toilet operations unfinished, but with him the completion of them took less time, and required no secrecy. From a little grip-sack he produced a pair of linen cuffs which he affixed publicly to his flannel shirt, and drawing a comb from his breast coat-pocket, he arranged his side locks and beard. Then he lit a cigar, opened the daily paper, and no doubt felt satisfied with himself and the world in general. The colonel, however, was the only quiet one of the party.

Chrissy Gilchrist had come out to have a good time, and she meant to have it, and lavished her sunny smiles and little pleasantries on all and sundry. The guard of course came in for his share, and not even the innocent newsboy escaped, but the majority of them were reserved for Trevor Johns, who though a little appalled at first at her frank advances, soon fell into the spirit of the thing, and resigned himself contentedly to his fate. Really you know, in a somewhat enervating climate like the spring climate of British Columbia, it is much nicer to be made love to than to make love; it is pleasant, in a way, to know that you can't do wrong, that you may smoke as much as you like, be as rude as ever you please, sail as near the wind in your words as you know how to—the nearer the better—and yet never offend. All this was a change to Trevor, and, though I regret to record it, the change rather pleased him; and, besides, Chrissy was undoubtedly, as he put it to himself, “an out-of-the-way pretty girl,” and therefore, in spite of the looks of wonder and disgust which he saw more than once on Pussy's face, he yielded himself to the syren, and sitting with her on the step outside the carriage, watched the rolling

wooded hills go by, and the blue lakes they embosomed; let the wind blow Chrissy's fair hair across his eyes as the train swung round a curve, and altogether flirted abominably, enjoyed himself amazingly, and gave poor Pussy the very worst heartache she had had since their trip began. Of course the old man saw it, and was sorry for Pussy; but what could he do? After all, he was the most confirmed old flirt himself, and was rattling away in a semi-paternal and altogether affectionate manner with a blue-eyed young woman almost young enough to be his granddaughter. For the first time in her life, Pussy, in spite of her beauty, seemed to have dropped out of the running, so that when she arrived at Shawnigan she found herself standing alone on the little platform gazing out upon the beautiful quiet lake, with eyes which had in them the lustre that dew gives to the meadows. She was used to Trevor's careless flirtations with every pretty woman he met, but until that day she had never known him so entirely carried away as to leave her out in the cold. In addition to all this, there was an unpleasant feeling which was new to her. For once she felt out of tune with her surroundings.

"I think, madame, that you are one of Mr. Snape's party. May I put your things into the boat?" said a voice at her side, and as she turned with a start to the speaker, Pussy Verulam looked into a face that she had not seen for three years.

"Noel!"

"Good God, Pussy!" exclaimed the man who had spoken, and then the hot blood rushed into his face, and raising his hat instead of taking the eagerly outstretched hand, he added, "I beg your pardon, Miss Verulam, but I am only Ned Jones here, and I implore you to forget that I was ever any one else. Since we must meet in the next few days, I may have a chance of explaining; and, if not, *forget*." And taking up an armful of gear, he walked with it down to the boat.

"Forget" is an easy word to say. If there was no difficulty in forgetting, this world would be an easier one to live in; but if we cannot forget, if we cannot bid it cease, we can at any rate hide our pain, and Pussy being a woman, and a well-bred one, hid hers bravely, so that when the rest of the party gathered round her, no one noticed her trouble. She was quiet and *distracte*, tired with the journey, and piqued,

Trevor thought, at his neglect, and so he was careful of her, and tried to make amends, but neither he nor any one else could have guessed that all the time her thoughts were wandering to that tall bronzed fellow in a flannel shirt and sadly patched blue overalls, who was doing Mr. Snape's bidding like a common porter on the wharf.

"Who is going to row the boat across, Jones?" asked Snape.

"I thought some of the men in your party would," answered the man in overalls. "The boat is light, and it's pleasant rowing."

"Pleasant rowing?" snarled Snape; "what, with so many people, and all that luggage! You couldn't hire me to do it. Why the devil didn't you get that fellow Winston to come over and help you?"

"Mr. Winston is away down the lake, fishing," replied Jones. "I didn't know that you wanted more help, and I don't know whether he would have come if I had known."

"Didn't know whether he would have come! He'd have come fast enough for a dollar," sneered the estate-agent. "It's some time to remittance day, isn't it?"

"I don't know much of Winston's business," replied Jones, coolly; "except that *his* place is not mortgaged, so that perhaps remittance day does not matter so much to him." And Jones looked Snape quietly, but squarely, in the face.

A remittance man he might be, and terribly down in his luck, but he was not a man to be bullied by every purse-proud cur, for all that. Snape saw this, and, to avoid a scene, asked more civilly—

"Well, what do you mean us to do?"

"There is only one thing you can do," replied Jones, beginning to pile all the mass of luggage into the biggest boat of the two. "If some of these gentlemen will scull the ladies over to my shack, I will try to get the luggage across. I dare say I can do it in time."

"Well, do that," replied Snape. "Do you fellows mind pulling the ladies across? I'm not much good myself in anything except a properly built boat."

"Mind!" replied young Esmond. "Why, of course not. What do you take us for? and what is the matter with the boat? But I'll tell you what we'll do. Here is another we can hire for the trip,

I dare say ; and if Sumner will help me, and Miss Verulam will steer, I'll back our boat against yours for—a pipe of baccy. That's not a big-enough stake to shock you, is it ?" he added laughingly to Pussy.

To this Snape was obliged to agree, but even after the party had been divided, the load in each boat was a heavy one, and it was soon apparent that the boat in which Snape was performing in an extraordinarily agricultural fashion had no chance, so that the race was abandoned by mutual consent, and the whole party rowed slowly along side by side, trailing a line from the stern of either boat, and now and then adding a silvery trout of half a pound or so to the possibilities of dinner.

A brighter picture could hardly have been found than Shawnigan lake presented that afternoon ; the two boat-loads of merrymakers, and the brilliant sunshades of the girls, affording just the touch of colour and life which the great expanse of blue water, set in its frame of pinewood, required ; but Pussy could not close her eyes to the blot on the picture, to that great, heavy, flat-bottomed tub piled high with baggage, which crawled along so painfully in their wake, propelled by one strong man earning his bitter

bread in the sweat of his brow. Pussy could well remember the time when her old playfellow would have done harder work for the mere fun of doing it, and knew well that no man in the party was likely to be his match on lake or river; but she understood, too, that things were different now, and her cheek which had flushed at Snape's insolent words to him, paled as she watched the heavy boat drop further and further astern.

"By Jove! I say, what a shame! Why, Snape, that fellow will break his heart trying to scull that mountain of luggage across," cried Captain Sumner, one of those charming fellows who carry with them to all our colonies the true flavour of the dear old country air, and who couldn't be other than gentlemen if they tried to be. "If you'll let me, I'm going to lend him a hand for the rest of the way."

"Oh, nonsense," replied Snape, "he's all right. Stop and have some lunch at the island, and just one cocktail, if the ladies will allow it, and then we can put out a spinner, and try for some of the bigger fish between here and the camp. Besides, you have done your share of work already."

"That was only a preliminary canter, and I'm just

beginning to feel like work," insisted Sumner. "Intercede for me with our host, Miss Verulam. You have no notion how necessary severe exercise is to middle-aged mariners with a tendency to grow fat."

The girls laughed. Sumner could afford to jest at the dangers of corpulence for some time yet; but Pussy's eyes rested on him gratefully, as she replied—

"Yes, let him go, Mr. Snape. I believe we *may* get our dressing-bags before dinner if he helps; and I don't know what would happen if the boatman broke down halfway."

"*He* won't break down," said Snape; "these fellows are like pack-ponies, not much to look at, but they'll last all day. They are used to work, you see."

"Do you know that I don't agree with you, Mr. Snape," replied Pussy, quietly, though she ~~was~~ very white; "and I am rather a judge of rowing. We live on the Thames, you know, at home, and it seems to me that your man there" (and the words, in spite of her quiet tone, had a bitter ring in them) "is something to look at as an oar. Don't you think so, Trevor?"

"Yes ; I'll bet he never learned to row in America," replied her cousin unthinkingly ; and then, seeing his mistake, he added apologetically, "I mean, colonel, that there is a difference of style between our rowing and yours, though of course I'm not judge enough to know which is the better."

"Guess you needn't ask me, Mr. Johns. Never had any time to waste on such things myself. All the exercise I ever took when I was a young man was between my rooms and my office, and I took that in the elevated railway most days," replied the downright man of business.

"Well, Miss Verulam, I'm going to help him even at the risk of having my style compared unfavourably to his," assented Sumner. "Don't be unkindly critical. Put me on board, and bring the boat back, Esmond," he added, and together the two shoved off and boarded the freight-boat, which was now crawling slowly past the island where the rancher's "guests" sat at lunch.

But though, with Sumner's sturdy help, the freight-boat made somewhat better time than before, it was a good half-hour longer in reaching the camping-ground than the other two boats.

That half-hour was an unlucky one for Noel. At the head of the lake, in the cool shadow of some great cedars, tents had been pitched for the whole party; hammocks had been swung between the trees, and a camp-fire lighted, not because one was needed in June, but for the sake of effect when the light waned and pipes were lighted. But it had been agreed that even in Vancouver Island in June it would hardly do to trust absolutely to the weather with ladies in camp, so that it had been arranged that the meals should be served and the ladies' beds put up in Ned Jones's shack, which was reasonably rainproof in places. To this shack the ladies therefore went on landing, to superintend the laying of the table. A few touches of their deft fingers, a few wreaths of maiden-hair fern and Oregon grape gathered in the woods, soon made, with the glass and silver and white napery which they had brought, quite a pretty show in the bare hut; and then, her duties performed, Pussy turned with feminine curiosity to inspect her old playfellow's home, never thinking that there might be anything which he would care to conceal from her. In all conscience, the shack was uncompromising enough in

its ugly nakedness. Rough pine poles laid on top of one another, the crevices chinked with mud and moss, made its walls; cedar slats roofed it, unplanned planks floored it, and its only ornaments were a few stags' heads, shot in the woods near by, and a couple of ill-tanned panther-skins. An inner room, into which the girls were shown to dress for dinner (!), was more interesting and better kept. It was Ned Jones's own den, and it showed traces of another life than that its owner now led. Tacked to the rough walls, without frames, were his household gods, a score or so of photographs, photographs of people who surely never expected to look down upon a kinsman amid such beggarly surroundings. Almost every man in that little gallery wore a uniform; every woman bore about her the stamp of a civilization older than that of the West. To Pussy, the faces were most of them faces of old friends, and one of the photographs put up at the head of his rough cot, she turned hurriedly with its face to the wall. She was only sixteen when that photograph was taken, but it was still too like her for her to run the risk—for his sake—of having it recognized by any of her

companions. Beyond the photographs, an old school "blazer" thrown on his bed, and a tin tub hanging on a nail, there was nothing else in the room suggestive of home. Unfortunately, Noel had not expected any one but Victorians in Snape's party, and they of course would know what "baching it in the woods" means, so he had taken no trouble to conceal anything. On a swinging shelf of rough lumber, hung on strips of deer-skin, was a motley collection of pipes (the meerschaum he never smoked for fear of breaking it, and the briar which he had almost burnt away with constant use), a chunk of T. and B. tobacco, and an empty bottle labelled, "Walker's Imperial Club Rye." There were two others like it on the floor of the room, and all three were empty.

So, then, this was the end of it! This the real explanation, whatever else he might tell her, "if the opportunity offered!" This was what Noel Johns called ranching, and this was why Noel Johns had become the hired man to Mr. Jacob Snape! Sick and sorry, Pussy turned away. Girl-like, she could not understand. To such as Pussy Verulam, the coarser vices, such as drink, are unintelligible.

But she had seen the wreck, and she thought that now she saw the rocks which had caused it, and the memory of that last night at Kingdon came back to her, and the contrast between then and now was almost too hideously vivid for her to endure. If she had only known the truth, she would have known that those three miserable empty bottles represented the total consumption of alcohol in the shack for the last two years, and that their contents had been drained by Noel and his brother ranchers when Shawnigan woods were deep in Christmas snows to the old folks at home. But she did not know; she didn't even notice the old wax drippings on them which showed why they had been kept in a house where there were no other candlesticks. All she felt was that the Noel she knew was dead; Ned Jones lived in his place. All she hoped for was that "the old man" would not discover his fall.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAMP AT SHAWNIGAN.

"SAY, Pussy, did you notice how like that hired man is to your young man?"

It was Chrissy Gilchrist who spoke from the hammock in which she was lazily swinging herself after dinner. She had known Miss Verulam just two days, but she called her "Pussy" already, and spoke of her "young man" as if Miss Verulam were a cook, and he a police-constable.

"My young man! Miss Gilchrist, who do you mean?"

"Why, who should I mean now, Miss Innocence? Mr. Trevor Johns, of course. Ain't he your young man? because if not, say so. He's just too sweet to be left loose any longer, if you don't claim him."

Pussy Verulam made no answer, but the firelight which fell in a broad wavering bar across her face as

she leaned up against a great cedar pole, made her look as if her whole face was aflame. The bar of red light passed her and flickered away across beds of waving maiden-hair ferns (which were knee-deep in places) and over fallen logs, until it touched the group of men, where they sat smoking their first after-dinner pipe. Pussy was almost afraid that they must have overheard what had been said, but they were out of earshot, even of Miss Gilchrist's high-pitched voice.

"Well, didn't you hear me, or are you dreaming of the other one?" persisted Pussy's persecutor. "I believe I'll have to tell Mr. Johns that you are a bit gone on the hired man."

"I wish that you wouldn't talk nonsense," answered Pussy, coldly. "I don't like it."

"Oh, come now, you ain't mad with me, are you? In America, girls like talking of their *fiancés*. Don't they do the same in the old country?"

"I really don't know," pleaded Pussy. "This is only my first, you know," she added, laughing a little.

"Your first? You don't say? Why, now, I was engaged to *my* first when I wasn't more'n fifteen.

That was Abel J. Walsh, in the soap business. But parper just waltzed in, and Abel J. had to waltz out."

"Poor Mr. Gilchrist!" remarked Pussy, sympathetically. "I hope you haven't tried him much."

"I guess it don't try him *any*, now; he's got used to it. You see it's always been like that. The boys come around and take you out for buggy rides and to the theatre, and give you flowers and things, and then when they drive you home they talk nonsense, and ask you things, and sometimes you get kinder tired of saying 'no.' But when it comes to business, *their* way of fixin' things don't suit parper, so he jest romps in and fires them out."

"And what do you do?"

"Oh, I don't do anything. Of course I'm sorry for the 'boys'; but I do hope parper will give me fair notice when he isn't going to take a hand in the game any longer. It would make a whole heap of difference."

Pussy laughed, but the gravity of the questions which might arise if "parper" should suddenly vacate his office, cast a temporary gloom over the Seattle belle. Pussy hoped for a moment that her

own affairs had escaped the fair Chrissy's memory, but she was doomed to disappointment.

"Well," she heard her friend say at last, "you ain't answered my question. *Don't* you think Mr. Johns is very like the hired man?"

"Is he? Well, perhaps he is; but how quick of you to notice it! I shouldn't have thought you would have had time to."

"Because I was so busy with your Mr. Johns? Now, don't be mean, Pussy; you'll have enough of him by-and-by; and he was the only man in the party who had eyes for any one but you. But I made time to have almost as good a look at the hired man as you had, and that's saying a good deal. They might almost have been brothers, those two, if Mr. Jones hadn't been so brown, and hard, and dressed like any ordinary dead beat."

"Dead beat! What is a dead beat? Forgive my ignorance, but you know you told me I was only a (what was it?) tenderfoot, myself."

"A dead beat is a—— Here, Captain Sumner," cried Miss Gilchrist, as the men came strolling into the firelight, "help me learn Miss Verulam American. She don't know what a dead beat is."

"Shocking, Miss Verulam!" laughed Sumner. "I thought that nowadays all young ladies learned the modern languages at their finishing schools. A dead beat is an interesting species of the genus tramp, variety whisky soak. He is found in most large cities, and is one of the few varieties of his species who try to get into the lockup and can't. The police won't collect him; he is too common, and utterly unremunerative. But who are you calling a dead beat, Miss Gilchrist? None of us, I hope."

"No, you ain't as bad as that, though you did stay half an hour too long over your pipes, and nearly gave us girls time to quarrel. We were saying that Mr. Jones, your hired man, Mr. Snape, would have been very like Mr. Johns there, if he hadn't been dressed so like a dead beat."

"By Jove! you are right. I noticed it myself at once. You must see your double, Johns; and I can tell you he isn't one to be ashamed of. The man's a gentleman, if he does dress like a dead beat," exclaimed Sumner.

"Yes, now you mention it," chimed in Snape, "there is a likeness, and it's odd, too, as the names

are so alike. A distant cousin who has forgotten how to spell his own name, eh, Johns?"

"Perhaps. All Americans are our cousins, you know," replied Trevor, carelessly; "but you have all got the advantage of me. I've never had a glimpse of his face yet. Where is he now? I don't see him about anywhere."

"Oh, I expect he's gone down to smoke his pipe by the Chinaman's fire," replied Snape.

"By Gad! it seems hard luck to turn the fellow out of his own shack, and not to offer him a place by the fire," remarked Trevor. "Let us ask him to come up, and tell us all about the fishing."

"He wouldn't come if we did. Better leave him alone," suggested Snape. "He's more at home amongst the Chinamen than he would be here."

Captain Sumner half opened his mouth to reply, but shut it again, leaving the words unsaid. He did not know Snape well, though he was his guest, but he liked him best when he was talking of anything but his hired man.

To change the conversation, some one asked what the plans were for the next day.

"I haven't made any definite plans," replied Snape.

"I always hate plans when I am out for a holiday ; but those who want to loaf can loaf here ; those who want to catch big fish can go on up to Satlam. You'll go to Satlam, I suppose, Mr. Verulam ?"

"Yes, Satlam for me, though if it was not for all these young men who cut me out, I would of course rather stay with the ladies."

"Oh, I dare say, old man !" cried Trevor, who in secret envied Mr. Verulam his freedom ; "but you won't get the ladies to forgive your desertion, will they, Miss Gilchrist ?"

"No, I won't, anyhow. I just relied on him and parper to take care of me, and now the only two men in the party worth anything are going. I shan't even say good night to you. Come along, Mrs. Snape." And Chrissy tumbled out of her hammock, collected what she called her ictas (*i.e.* fan, handkerchief, and other trifles), and made her way to the side of a stout, useful-looking lady who had been vainly endeavouring to keep herself awake for the last half-hour. Poor Mrs. Snape ! hers was indeed a hard lot in camp. Nature had created her to mend clothes, abolish spiders' webs, remove grease-spots, and generally keep her home spick and span. In

her own line, she was unrivalled and indefatigable, ready to begin work at seven every morning, and to keep at it, with three intervals for the consumption of square meals, until nine in the evening. But at or a little before nine Mrs. Snape's nature rebelled; her jaw began to drop, her eyes to close, and, if seated in her own armchair, her whole body collapsed comfortably amongst the cushions, and she slept peacefully until it was bedtime. But in camp nothing could possibly be kept neat. There were spiders' webs everywhere; caterpillars in most places; and in the evening she dared not recline in a hammock, because that would mean instant slumber sound and noisy; whereas, if she sat on a log, she was in constant danger of tumbling off. She had fallen off once already, but luckily that had been before the men had joined the party. For the last five minutes Chrissy had been watching her anxiously.

She had seen her turban tip coquettishly over her ear, she had seen her *toupe* slide two inches further down her nose, she had seen a bland smile spread all over her dear fat old face as her ball of wool rolled merrily from her lap into the red ashes, and by the

time Chrissy reached her, her feet had already given two convulsive little kicks. Another second and Mrs. Snape would have passed over into the shadow which lay beyond the great log on which she had perched, but Chrissy saved her, and, all unconscious of the imminent danger from which she had escaped, the good old lady gathered her chicks under her wing, and plodded away towards the shack. The road thither was a long one, and in the dark a very rough one, as the poor lady found to her sorrow, breaking her shins over logs, and slipping into bog-holes over her sturdy ankles, while her undutiful spouse left her severely alone, attaching himself to Chrissy, and thus giving Pussy the opportunity she wanted for five minutes' conversation with Trevor.

"Give me your arm, Trevor," she said; "I don't want to tumble over these logs and break my nose; and," she added in a lower tone, "drop behind the others a little. I have something I want to tell you."

"What is it, sweetheart? I hope I am not in disgrace," replied Trevor, doubtfully.

"Does your conscience prick you, sir? No, I'm not going to scold. I have something more

important to talk about. Do you remember three years ago singing 'Auld Lang Syne' at Kingdon?"

"What, when Noel went away? Of course I do."

"Do you know where Noel is now?"

"No; that is just what we want to find out, isn't it? Why, have you had the luck to hear of him from any of these people to-night, Pussy?"

"Yes, I heard of Noel to-night."

"You did! Who told you? Where is he?" asked Trevor, eagerly.

"Mr. Snape expected that he had gone off to the Chinamen's camp, because he would feel more at home there than he would with us," quoted Pussy, quietly.

"What do you mean, dear? Snape doesn't know Noel?"

"Oh, Trevor, can't you understand? Mr. Snape doesn't know Noel Johns, but he hires Ned Jones, and Ned Jones is Noel Johns. No wonder the *hired man* is something like you, Trevor, is it?"

"Pussy, are you chaffing? Noel is somewhere west, ranching."

"Well, can you get further west than this? This is ranching, or whisky-soaking, or being a

dead beat, or any other vile thing these people like to call it," cried the girl passionately. "That man in the flannel shirt, who pulled the freight boat across, was our Noel."

Trevor Johns had his faults, but jealousy was not one of them. He knew the true little woman on his arm too well to doubt her, though he could see now that the sweet lips were quivering, and the great grey eyes had overflowed at last. In the shadow of the cedars, he passed his arm round her waist, and pressed her closer to him, and then, true to his nature, turned to her for advice. Trevor was always ready to row, but he had learned already to expect Pussy to steer.

"What are we to do? We can't let him stay like that."

"We cannot alter anything at present. All I want you to do is to be careful not to betray him. He doesn't want to be recognized before these people, so we must not recognize him."

"All right; but I can't see why he need mind. A fellow can't help being poor, and I don't suppose he need be ashamed of us."

"He probably has his reasons, Trevor; but, at any

rate, he doesn't want to be known as Noel Johns. That should be enough for us."

"All right, I'll keep your secret, and I'll tell the old man; but I hope that fellow Snape will keep a civil tongue in his head. I don't much fancy seeing *my* cousin ordered about by him."

"If Noel can stand it, we can. Good night, Trevor."

"Good night, dear," he said, and the next moment he saw her willowy figure pass through the light of the open doorway. The door was closed, and the light went out, and he found himself in a darkness which was intense. There was no moon, and the trees stood so close together that you could not see the stars, while the light of the camp-fire was for the moment hidden. As Trevor and Pussy had made their way to the shack, they had had the glimmer from the open doorway to guide them. It was not much, but when he turned his back upon it, and passed over the path again, without light and alone, Trevor Johns realized how great an influence any guiding light, and any companionship, has in shortening and making smooth our paths.

Suddenly his reverie was broken by a wild

unearthly laugh, which came from somewhere in the middle of the lake. It was only a loon calling, and Trevor was woodsman enough to recognize the cry, though he wondered at it, at such an hour, but it made him shudder nevertheless, and mutter as he hurried towards the camp-fire, "Great Heaven! if he has been alone here for three years, I wonder that he has not gone mad."

He had some reason for his thought. The depths of the cedar forests and the still lakes they hide and overshadow, are almost as full of horror when the sun is hidden, and no voice of man breaks their silence, as they are full of delight when the sunlight dances on their waters and girls' laughter echoes down their aisles. A lonely life in the heart of them, with only regret for a comrade, is such a foretaste of hell as might break the spirit even of a remittance man of twenty-three.

CHAPTER V.

THE FOOL-HEN'S PLAY.

THE next day the old man went up to Satlam to fish, accompanied by Colonel Gilchrist and one or two of the others. The old man meant business. He had heard that British Columbian salmon would not take a fly, but he didn't believe it. At any rate, he meant to try them with such an assortment of flies, jock scotts, silver doctors, and so forth, with such skill and patience as he thought had never been given to them before. Surely, he thought, American salmon, as he called them, must yield to British skill. The colonel, too, meant business, but not with that gigantic "fishing-pole" which he was "toting along." No, no! He would have a try with "bugs" and "hoppers," just to pass away the time, and maybe he would catch as many salmon as Mr. Verulam; but he carried *his* fly-book in his

pocket too, and the fish he was after was bigger than any salmon that ever went up the Frazer. Colonel Gilchrist's fly-book was the prospectus of a mining company in which he had an interest in Assineboia, and before he went home he hoped to have enticed with it a good many pounds of British capital into his possession. But he said very little at first. In his way Colonel Gilchrist was an exceedingly skilful and experienced fisherman, and he knew the danger of showing himself to his fish before he had hooked him. As a matter of fact, neither of the anglers had much success on that first expedition. They showed the fish their lures; they could see the great fellows swimming about all around them, but they never got a rise.

Meanwhile, those who had stayed behind in camp, passed the time pleasantly enough, boating and bathing, fishing in a lazy kind of way, and flirting just as much as was good for them. But day after day went by, and, in spite of Pussy's efforts, she never got a chance of speaking to Noel alone. Whatever had to be done about the camp, he did it; but his work seemed to be done, the wood chopped, the stores brought from the station, before any of the

party were astir; and after breakfast he was always away with the men fishing or guiding them to some likely place for bear, or bigger fish than those to be found near the camp. As a rule, he went out with Sumner or young Esmond, for of late Trevor and Snape had been inseparable, though they rarely seemed to catch anything; and, indeed, their chief interest appeared to be in the receipt of the morning paper, and in certain letters which Snape received almost daily. As Trevor did not tell her what these letters were about, the girl did not inquire, but she could not help seeing that they appeared to contain exceedingly pleasant news for Snape, in which Trevor seemed to share. For some reason, which she could not define even to herself, Pussy liked her host less and less day by day, and would have been glad had he and Trevor been less inseparable.

It was the last day of their stay at Shawnigan when Pussy met Noel again. The girl had been away by herself in the woods gathering a great bunch of ferns and the sweet-scented deersfoot, as a souvenir of her visit to the lake. The cedar swamp in which she was resting was heavy with the sweet scents of June, and the afternoon sunlight came in

broken bars through the warm darkness which the great trees made. Pussy had had a long ramble and was tired, and not quite certain of her way to camp, so for awhile she leaned against the trunk of a huge cedar which lay prone across the logging trail.

"You will have to go a long way round, Miss Verulam, unless you think that you could climb over with my help," said a voice above her; and, looking up, the girl saw Noel, whose moccasined feet had come along the great trunk as noiselessly as a bear's.

"It's higher than my head, Noel; but you have helped me to climb higher than that before now."

"Why harp on the past, Miss Verulam?" replied the man; "when one has lost heaven, it is better to let him forget it."

"I say 'no' to that; and as to referring to the past, you promised to tell me your story since that last night at Kingdon. I have obeyed you in keeping your secret, now keep your promise to me."

"There is no story to tell—no story, at least, that you could understand."

"Noel, did I not understand in the old days? Why not now? Why should our old friendship have changed?"

"Because you are no longer Pussy to me, nor I Noel. And as to promises——"

"It's not necessary to break all, because you have broken one," said the girl, bitterly.

"Broken one?" he asked almost angrily; and then softening his tone at once, he added, "but I dare say. What was it? I promised to write, and didn't write; or to make a fortune and come home, and I never came?"

"We didn't blame you for not writing; the old man thought you were too busy. Is this the sort of thing you have been doing all the time?"

"Yes, almost all the time. It's hard work, isn't it? and if I keep on steadily until the day of judgment, it may be remunerative. Did you notice my potato patch? I felled fifty trees, some of them ten feet through, to make that."

"But why do it? Surely there is something better than this to do out here!"

"Oh yes, there is. I shoot game for the market, for instance, in the winter. That pays."

"Pays! Yes, pays, perhaps, for bread and meat."

"Well, not always, Miss Verulam. Bacon and

beans are about my form, as a rule, but cold potatoes will do at a pinch. You needn't cook them more than once every three days, if you boil a good potful at a time."

"And yet you waste your money on that vile whisky!"

The words were hardly out of Pussy's mouth before she repented them. After all, this was a man to whom she was speaking, and not her old play-fellow Noel. But the angry light faded from Noel's eyes sooner than the colour from her cheeks, and he answered quietly. "Did the man who told you that I drank tell you that I gambled too? If not, ask Snatch; he can tell you how I lost every penny, and why the beggar they call Ned Jones starves on his mortgaged farm."

So then it was true, after all; she had not misread the signs; the thumbed cards and the empty bottles. Though her heart sank and her throat felt as if it would burst with the sobs which she must restrain, she could say nothing. She had hoped that she had been mistaken, that all could be explained. Now she knew why Noel, who went away three years ago to conquer the world, was but a

land-shark's drudge, and in the bitterness of her heart she walked wearily away from him without attempting to reply.

"Pussy!"

The old name, and a tone in the speaker's voice which made his cry sound like a prayer, made her turn.

"Well, Noel."

"Why will you insist on knowing all about a poor devil who has wrecked his own life?"

"Forgive me, forgive me, Noel. I ought not to have asked, but it is so hard to forget the dear old days, and now——"

"Well, and even now, Pussy, think the best of me. I've been a fool, but never worse, never worse, I swear." And he caught her hands in his, and drew her to him that he might see whether he had driven the doubting trouble from her eyes.

"I believe you," she said simply; "but oh, Noel, why can you not be as strong as Trevor?"

At Trevor's name he dropped her hands. "You cannot judge a man's strength until it has been tried," he said coldly.

"That was not spoken like a Johns. You know

as well as I do that nothing would ever tempt Trevor to gamble, or—or——”

“Drink ; out with it, dear. Well, perhaps, if Trevor never drank more than I have done in the last few years, it would do him no harm. But there, forgive me, Pussy ; I'm not as good a fellow as my cousin, and never was. Fortune is right to give him all the prizes ; but give me back your friendship, and try to forget my fall.”

The two had been walking slowly down the trail as they talked, and had been so deeply engrossed in each other that they had taken no notice of a constant cheeping in the ferns by their side, nor of certain little fluffy brown things which had been trying to tumble out of their way as well as their ungrown wings and feeble legs would let them. Now, however, Noel and Pussy had come too close to the brood, and what was this that they saw ? A bird about as large as a partridge was rushing along the trail towards them, its breast on the ground, its feathers erect with fury, its eyes ablaze, and its beak wide open. Half-frightened, the girl drew back, and as she did so, the creature dashed right up to them, hissing strangely as it came, and absolutely struck

right and left at Noel's overalls : a thing of less than two pounds' weight, which, with insignificant beak and feeble claws, was actually contesting the road with an armed giant a hundred times its weight.

"Steady, old lady, steady!" said Noel, looking laughingly at his little foe, "I'm not going to hurt your little ones. Be off with you, will you?" and he tried to drive the bird gently away; but in spite of all his efforts, the gallant little mother hung round him, menacing him all the time, until the last of her clumsy chicks had reached a place of safety. Then she thought of herself; there was a quick rush of brown wings, and she was gone. The forest play was over.

"What a plucky little darling! What is it, Noel?" the girl asked, when the bird had flown.

"A grouse with chickens. Yes, they are as plucky and self-sacrificing as anything in the world, I believe. That is why they call them 'fool-hens,' I suppose."

"Fool-hens! I wish men had some of their folly."

"So do I, Pussy. I suppose the best of them have some of their courage; but self-sacrifice is the virtue of your sex, isn't it?"

"Are you laughing at me, or do you mean it?"

"Of course I mean it."

"And do you think that yours is the nobler virtue? Do you think it harder to dare than to deny yourself?"

"God forbid! but then, Pussy, I never had a very high opinion of mere courage. If a fellow has it, he can't help it, and it's no particular credit to him; if he is an Englishman, and hasn't got it, he ought to be drowned as a *lusus naturæ*."

Pussy laughed.

"Well, I won't go as far as that, but I do think that most of us might take that fool-hen for a model, without losing our self-respect."

"You don't know the fool-hen as I do, Pussy. When she has no chicks, she thoroughly deserves her name. Why, that bird has so much confidence in man's natural integrity that she will sit for an hour on the limb of a pine for boys to throw stones at her, and will never wake up to her mistake until she lies a mass of crumpled feathers and broken bones at the foot of the tree. I think, if you knew my history, you might fancy me too like that fool-hen."

"I would forgive any folly for such self-sacrifice as hers."

"Would you? Unfortunately every one has a chance of making a fool of himself; the chances of performing acts of heroism are rare in this ugly work-a-day world; and as for self-sacrifice, some of us are so beggared of all that makes life worth living that we have nothing left to sacrifice. Can you fancy what it is to live year after year a nameless man in these woods, with nothing to do but to fell trees and make a hideous mess of nature? to stand at night, when the day's work is over, amongst the trees you have felled, and see the dark come down amongst the stiff rows of pines? Pines, pines everywhere, and beyond, through the tops, a glimpse of more pines; and somewhere through them, a little inland sea, as still as the forest and as dreary."

"But, Noel, you used to be so fond of the woods in old times."

"And so I am still of the *live* woods, but these are dead and dumb. Everything in them is the same for ever and ever, and everything is dumb. Why, even the creatures get cowed. Who ever heard

a bird sing here ? The very deer come like ghosts ; the great bears pass like shadows. But come, Pussy, you must get back into the firelight. It is getting too cheerless for you in this cursed timber." And so saying, he led her along the great fallen cedar, which made a broad, raised roadway for them for nearly a hundred yards above the underbrush, and so down on to a trail and to the camp. Just before reaching camp, Noel asked her, "Is Trevor a good business man ?"

"I don't know," she answered ; "I suppose he is. I know he thinks he is ; but Marshall, of course, does most of his work for him at home. Why do you ask ?"

"Because they tell me that you are going to marry him, little friend," he answered gently, looking away from her ; "and because it is necessary for a man who would keep his own for those who have a right to it, to be better business men here than at home. Here you can trust no one. Tell Trevor that, and tell him that I include even his friend Snape in those I would have him distrust."

"But Snape is his host. Whatever he may do to

others, surely he would not mislead a guest and a friend."

"Perhaps you are right, but caution Trevor. Stay! Tell him, from me, that Snape was my best friend once, and my host very often, but his hospitality cost me more than a yacht would have done, and now I am his 'hired man.' Good night, Miss Verulam," he added, raising his cap as he spoke; "you can find your way home, I think." And so saying, he turned and vanished down a side trail which led away from the camp, leaving Pussy to walk the rest of the distance with a couple of her friends who had come out from the camp to meet her.

That night, when *he* lay somewhere outside the light of the camp-fires smoking his pipe in the silence, which had grown on him as the moss had grown on the cedars, *she* had to bear her part in the pleasant raillery of the picnic-party; but when the lights were out, and the camp was hushed, she lay awake wondering long into the night, and was no nearer the truth at the end of it than she was when she first met him.

That he was ruined she saw; that he was heart-

broken she felt ; and yet he was the same old Noel, and neither face nor bearing accorded with what she took to be his admission, that his ruin was of his own making. He had said he was a gambler, and yet he looked neither gambler nor sot.

CHAPTER VI.

"VENGEANCE IS MINE."

THE day after Pussy's talk with Noel, the party broke up; the naval men had their duties to resume, Snape had business to attend to, and Chrissy Gilchrist was wearying for her hotel and town life. No forest thing is more impatient of the restraint of captivity than is your true American of the "pleasures" of the country. There are, of course, grand exceptions to this rule as to every other; there are not only men, but gallant women, who have crossed the plains, in the old dangerous days, in prairie schooners, and have lived half their lives on the very edge of the desert, but Americans as a race are exceptionally gregarious, and ninety-nine out of every hundred of them would crowd into cities, however mean and beggarly, if they had the chance. A proof of this spirit is afforded, if one be needed, by the fabulous

prices paid for suburban lands, whilst infinitely better lands for farming, which might be bought for next to nothing, are left unoccupied. But I am wandering from my story.

Owing to some miscalculation, the whole of our picnic-party arrived at Shawnigan platform more than an hour before the train was due. Snape of course blamed that fool Jones.

"One would have thought that as the coming of the train is the only event here in the day, you might have known when it left," he grumbled.

"It used to leave about this time of day, but I suppose the train times have been altered lately," replied Jones, indifferently. "I don't trouble the train much myself. When I want to go to Victoria, I generally walk."

"The deuce you do! Isn't it an awfully long tramp?" asked Trevor.

"Twenty-five or thirty miles, I suppose; but I would rather walk that distance through the woods than earn the fare, a dollar fifty, in any other way that I know of."

"By Gad! I believe you are right. I wonder if you would mind my coming with you, if you are

going in to-day?" asked Trevor, glancing at the small pack which Noel had strapped on his shoulders, and thinking that the walk would give him the opportunity he wanted of talking quietly to his cousin, without any chance of interruption.

"I should like it," replied Noel, warmly; "only it is a long way to town from here."

"But there are plenty of stations, are there not, between here and there?"

"Yes, five or six; but you will have to go right through with it if you start. There is only one train a day from Shawnigan to Victoria."

"You are all right, Johns, the station-master says the train isn't due for another hour and a half, and she'll be an hour and a half late by the time she gets to the 'Summit' to-day. So, if you start now, you can catch the train there. You will have had enough of it in seven or eight miles, I expect," said Sumner. "Come and have a drink before you start. Won't you have one too?" he added pleasantly to Jones. "You'll be dry enough before you get to Victoria."

"No, thank you, Captain Sumner; there's lots of water on the way, and I never touch anything

stronger nowadays except to drink a toast in once a year."

"By George! that's going a long while between drinks," replied Sumner; and Pussy, who overheard the answer, felt a twinge of conscience when she remembered what a hurry she had been in to judge her old playfellow.

"I say, why shouldn't we all walk as far as the first station?" suggested Sumner. "What do you say, ladies? It's either that or a three hours' wait here; and the station-master says the line is a regular garden of wild flowers."

"Oh, let us go, then!" cried Pussy, thoughtlessly. "What do you say, Miss Gilchrist?"

"Well, I'll do my possible to get the guard to pick up your bodies as we pass, but you don't catch Christina Gilchrist walking seven miles when she can ride in a car."

After a little more discussion, it was arranged that Trevor and Pussy should, at any rate, walk with Noel as far as the first station, and there rejoin the rest of the party, and it looked for a moment as if the three old friends would at last get a chance of being alone together for a couple of hours; Sumner and



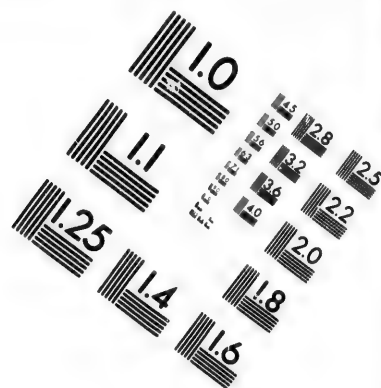
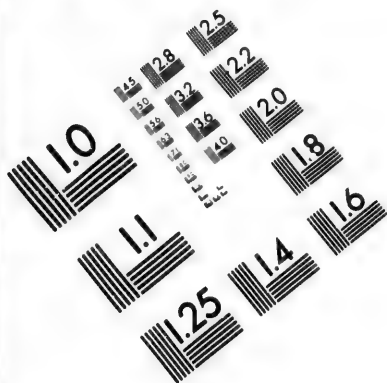
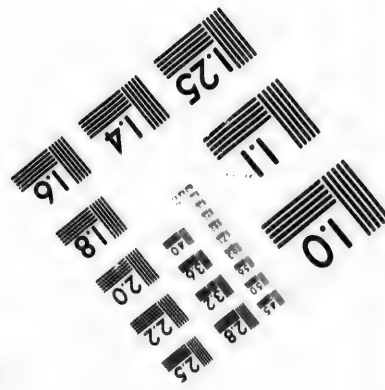
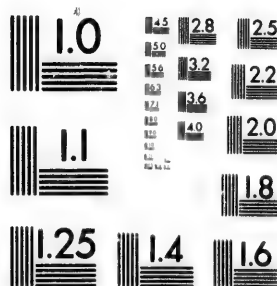
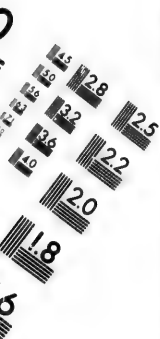


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Esmond having gallantly decided to stay with the beautiful American. But if either of the three rejoiced, the joy was premature. For the last day or two Snape had hung perpetually upon Trevor's heels, as if he feared to leave him alone, and that more especially when Jones was about. That he had guessed the relationship which existed between them was of course impossible, but he had marked the likeness, and had been shrewd enough to see that there was a natural sympathy existing between his hired man and his guests, in which he himself had no share.

He knew, too, what Jones might say of him and his dealings, if he chose to; and, even at the cost of a walk which he hated, he meant to prevent any conversation which might interfere with his little plans for Mr. Trevor Johns' future benefit; so, to every one's surprise, and Noel's intense disgust, he expressed his intention of joining the walking party.

"What, *you* going to walk?" remarked Sumner.
"I thought you told us that the only way for a rational man to travel was outside of a horse?"

"So it is, but I haven't got a horse here; and as

"This is the last day of our holiday, I must make the most of it. I shall have to sit all day in my office for the next month or two. Come on, Johns. Lead the way for us, Jones."

This was by no means what either Noel or his cousin had bargained for, but there was no escape for them, and the grin on Snape's face showed that he knew it. With a muttered malediction, Noel shouldered his pack, and plodded steadily along the line, getting his reward now and then in being allowed to help Pussy over the trestle-bridges, or in showing her some fresh fern or flower on the side of the track.

It was whilst the others were on the line, and whilst Noel and Pussy were busy digging up some roots of the brilliant columbine, that she had a chance of asking him, "Are you really walking to save the fare? Are things as bad as that, Noel?"

"As bad, Pussy, and worse. I am utterly stone-broke," he replied, bending over the roots.

"But you've got your pay to draw from Snape for your week's work."

"Not much! I mean that is not quite so. My

claim for work done is set off against the interest I owe him on his confounded mortgage."

"But you've got the house and land," she persisted.

"Yes, to-day I have; but he has been taking foreclosure proceedings against me, and that won't be mine long."

"But, Noel, can't you——"

"No, I can't, Pussy. I can't do anything but go; and, what is more, that is just what I want to do. Better be stone-broke, and begin afresh as a day-labourer, than go on eating my heart out in that place; besides, I couldn't go back now that you and the others have been there."

"Why not?"

"Mere sentiment, but I couldn't. I was trying to forget, and you have made me remember. But don't grieve, little sister. You have only done me good, as you always did."

"But what will you do, Noel? You must let my father help you. Oh, how I wish he was here!"

"No, Pussy, that is just the one thing for which I would never forgive you. I know, of course I know, that it would be the natural thing for a remittance

man like myself to sponge on his friends, and I know the old man would like to help me, but it can't be. Without a little self-respect I couldn't live. Leave me that, dear."

Pussy was silent, except for an odd choking sound which the man's quick ear caught in a moment.

"Good God! child, you are not crying for me? What a brute I am to have made you!"

"Don't mind me, Noel," he heard her falter; "go on gathering up those roots, or the others will notice. I shall be all right in a minute."

And so she was, poor brave little heart, or as nearly right as she could contrive to appear, with cold white cheeks, and eyes which tried to smile to hide the tears in them.

A minute later the others joined them, and Trevor good-naturedly took charge of the bundle of roots, saying—

"You can't take two packs, Jones. You have a big-enough one already."

"Yes, you've got a big pack for a night's stay in Victoria," added Snape. "What have you got in it?"

"My blankets, a dozen rounds of ammunition,

an old pair of boots, a clean shirt, and some photographs; all mine under any circumstances, I believe, Mr. Snape," retorted Noel, with an emphasis not lost on two of his hearers.

"Oh yes, that's all right, quite right. I suppose you don't mean to go back to the shack for a bit?"

"No, not for some time." And then, as if an idea had occurred to him, Noel raised his voice a trifle, to be sure that Pussy would hear him. "I've heard of a place down the line on the mainland. The pay won't amount to much, but the work will be regular."

It was a lie this, of course, but a very kindly meant lie; and the flush on the girl's face, and the glad look in her eyes, would have repaid Noel for a worse one. Besides, it was always possible that he might get such work. At any rate, he was going to the mainland with his last few dollars, to look for it.

"And what are you going to do about your remittance, Mr. Jones? Have you made arrangements about that, or can I see to having it and your mail forwarded to you? You'd better come in, and see me about that to-morrow," said Snape.

It was the first time that Snape had used the "Mr." as a prefix to his hired man's name, but it had just dawned upon him that perhaps he had not got the last drop of blood out of his man yet, and whilst there was a drop left, it might still be worth while to be civil. Besides, if the farm did not sell for the mortgage (and though it was worth more, Snape meant to take care to buy it in for a good deal less), there would always be Jones's personal covenant and his remittance to fall back upon.

"I am sorry to say the remittance has been stopped, Snape," replied Noel, his eyes beginning to twinkle a little, though he lowered his voice so that Pussy might not hear of his utter destitution. "These are all my goods on my back, and I think that they are hardly worth attaching, even if you could attach them, which you can't."

Those who had been used to seeing Mr. Snape's everyday smile of frank benevolence would have been shocked at the ugly look and uglier curse of which he was guilty at that moment, but the remittance man seemed to enjoy them, though his enjoyment was cut short, for just at that moment his quick ear caught the sound of the coming train.

For a second he seemed uncertain, and bent down over the rails until his ear almost touched them. Straightening himself, and turning quickly to Trevor and his companion, who had lagged behind somewhat, he called out, "Hurry up, there, Miss Verulam. Help her, Mr. Johns. The station is in sight, but the train will be round the corner in a few minutes, and this is a steep down-grade." And then tossing his pack and his rifle on the embankment, he ran back and took one of Pussy's hands whilst Trevor took the other, and between them the two hurried the girl along over the ties in quicker time than Snape could make. When the train whistled as it came round the corner, Pussy Verulam, thanks to her friend's help and to her own nimble feet, was safe at the siding, very much out of breath, but laughing at the run she had had. This was like the old days, she thought, as the memory of many a merry scramble with those two recurred to her; and Noel, carried away by the excitement of the moment, dropped all his stiffness, and for the moment was himself again. They had both forgotten Mr. Snape's existence.

Suddenly Trevor, who was looking back up the line, caught Noel's arm.

"Look, Noel, look! What the devil's the matter with Snape?"

The line runs abruptly from the summit, and the grade which the train enters upon directly it passes through the cutting at the top of the divide is an unusually sharp one.

Between this cutting and the station there was a switch, and as Noel's eyes rested on the switch, his face hardened cruelly and the corners of his mouth curled in a bitter grin.

The cutting was choked with smoke, some of which was already trailing away over the soft green of the cedars below, and from the centre of the dark cloud the engine was rushing down to the platform at such a pace that nothing but the strongest of air-brakes could have pulled it up even there. Between the cutting and the platform, nothing short of a miracle could stop it. And between the cutting and the platform, right in the train's path, stood Snape, the man who had wrought Noel's ruin, struggling with frantic energy for freedom, and struggling in vain, swaying his body now to the right, now to the left, and anon making wild clutches at his foot which seemed held as in a vice by the rails. It *was* held in

a vice and by the rails themselves, along which already hummed the low thunder of the coming train. Snape could feel the vibration in his body, and in his brain, and he shrieked and would, rat-like, have torn off his own limb to escape had he had strength enough left in his feeble body to do so. What had happened to him was what has happened to many a braver man: he had caught his heel in the jaws of the switch, and the more he struggled the tighter grew the grip. In another minute he must take his choice. If he had the cool courage of the railway employé, he would throw himself down at right angles to the track, the ankle would snap, and the great engine would sweep by and amputate the damaged limb as neatly as a surgeon's knife; if not—well, if not, the engine would still sweep on, and crush the little Jew as a man's foot crushes a beetle.

"Trapped, by God!" came from between Noel's clenched teeth, and for a moment his hard face only hardened, while all that was vindictive and devilish in his nature gained the mastery, and showed itself in his face.

"Oh, Noel, save him!"

It was no voice of an angel, only a trembling girl's prayer, but the voice was a voice which the old Noel had never disobeyed, a voice which had never appealed to him in vain. Had she been able to measure the danger she asked him to face, possibly she would never have spoken; but she could not measure it. As for him, he never stayed to. She had loosed the string, and like an arrow from the bow he flew to do her bidding.

There was a rattle of rails, a roar of wheels, a volume of steam and smoke, and the girl closed her eyes, sick and swooning. She dared not see them die.

Had she dared to keep her eye open she would have seen a knife flash twice round the trapped man's foot, she would have seen him wrenched by a mighty effort from the wreck of his brown-leather boot, and tumbled headlong from under the very wheels of the engine down the steep incline on the left-hand side of the track, at the bottom of which he lay limp and motionless.

The poor wretch had swooned, and so been saved from part of the bitterness of death.

But she dared not open her eyes, so she neither

saw what I have described nor that the great roaring creature of iron and steam and fire, though baulked of one victim, had revenged itself upon another.

As Noel flung his man clear of the track, Death came very near to him. Its shadow was over him, its hot breath in his face, and its iron hand reached and all but caught him.

Quickly as he sprang back, he was not quick enough. Some projecting point of the engine struck him, and for a breathing-space it seemed as if he must go down in the monster's path.

The next moment he, too, was whirling down the slope. Death had failed to make good his grip, and though Noel rolled over and over, and then lay very still for awhile, he was not dead. Indeed, he was on his feet before Snape, wiping the blood out of his eyes with one hand and trying in vain to raise the other. He was very unsteady on his legs, and very white, and one arm hung limp and broken by his side; but he was making light of his injuries to the train hands who had picked him up when Pussy and Trevor reached him.

"I'm all right, boys; just look after that chap," he was saying; and one of them who stood with

his hands in his pockets "sizing him up," spat out a stream of tobacco-juice, and said—

"Say, boy, you're pretty gritty—damn me if you ain't. That there chap owes his neck to you."

"Yes, and I owe him a thousand dollars. That's a good deal worse," muttered Noel, bitterly. He had saved the man's life, but he hated him still.

If Pussy or the recording angel heard his words, it is to be hoped that they judged him, not by his words, but by his deeds. At any rate, she and Trevor supported him into the train, and made him as comfortable there as they could. There was no talk of walking now, and even if there had been no one to pay his fare, the train would have carried one passenger that day for nothing.

As for him, he never asked after Snape, who, but for his fright and some unavoidably rough surgery at Noel's hands, was none the worse for his adventure. All through the journey down, Noel lay half asleep or swooning with pain of his broken arm and ribs, his eyes shut or dreamily fixed on Pussy as she nursed him. Only once, when she bent over him to rearrange a bandage which had slipped, he smiled a little bitterly and whispered feebly,

"Miss Verulam, do you know that I think I am more like the fool-hen than ever. After being hit once, I've given that little beast another chance." And she, half ashamed to preach the old sweet faith in which her own pure life had been led, laid her hand timidly on his arm, and murmured too low for others to hear, "Vengeance is mine ; I will repay, saith the Lord."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE HOUSE OF PAIN.

THERE is one institution in Victoria of which those of her citizens who helped to build it, may well be proud. In the heyday of youth, when the soft air of spring, blown off the sunlit sea, suggests nothing but years of health and vigour and happiness, men may pass the great white building on their way to Oak Bay, Victoria's fairest suburb, without noticing, certainly without admiring it. It is not beautiful—even its kindest well-wishers must admit that; and no one who could pass on down the avenue to gaze on the glories of a sunset on Mount Baker would even stay to look at the Jubilee Hospital.

And yet, perhaps, when the greatest of all reporters, God's recording angel, passes over the capital of British Columbia, he may linger longer over that plain white building, and even report on it more

favourably to his Employer, than on the imposing six-hundred-thousand-dollar building of politicians, with which they boast that they anchored the capital of the province to their city for ever. When the fever of the gold-digger has passed, when the courage of the pioneer is ebbing with the ebbing years, when the thews of the lumberer are loosened, when the miner's strength has been shattered by a blast, when aneurism of the heart alone reminds the packer of the vast burdens he has borne, it is there that he may be certain of finding rest and of realizing that in all the selfish battle for bread, men have still, in one instance, at least, remembered that they were men, and in the chivalry of human nature provided a haven of rest in which those worsted in the battle may recruit for a space before they come up to the scratch for another round, or go hence to their reward.

It was to this house of pain that they carried Noel Johns, through hay-fields humming with summer life, past thickets of dog-roses pink with blossom; and here, thanks to skill and careful nursing, his young bones soon began to mend. Pussy Verulam and Trevor were, of course, daily visitors to the sick man, and even Snape sent his card "to

inquire" with a basket of fruit, which Noel would not allow to remain in his room. Snape himself did not come, but he explained to Trevor that Jones had such an unfortunate and unreasonable prejudice against him that he thought it better to keep away. That was the worst of business. However kindly you might mean, and however much you might wish to benefit a client, there were always some fellows who would visit their own follies upon their agents, and blame them for the results of their own indiscretions. With such men it was useless to argue, but it made life very sad, very sad indeed !

So plausible was the man, and so gentle—when on guard—that Trevor could not help feeling that Noel had misjudged him. In a mere matter of business Noel had through his own recklessness got himself into an unpleasant position with Snape. But was that Snape's fault? Trevor Johns thought it might not be; and Snape's house being a pleasant one, rendered attractive by the glitter of alluring speculations and the presence of Chrissy Gilchrist, Trevor Johns haunted it more than ever, though he did so as much as possible "on the quiet," for neither the old man nor Pussy were quite as reasonable

in their estimate of Snape as he was inclined to be.

Meanwhile, Pussy's influence upon her old playmate became daily stronger. It was as if the sun had at last penetrated a mountain valley, where the frost had lain black and hard for years, and little by little the thaw came, and all the gracious things in the man's nature revived. In a week he could talk of home and the old days by the river; could chaff merrily enough with the "old man," and even told him one d'y that he would still come back to Kingdon, and bring him "fivers" with which to "go on the tear like Balmaine's old governor." He even reminded Pussy that none of America's multi-millionaires had even made their fabulous fortunes until they had—at least once in their careers—touched the bottom of Poverty's pit. It was necessary, he said, to get down to bed-rock before you could hope to lay the foundations of a really solid pile.

Noel Johns was young and naturally sanguine, and rest and good food, such as he had been a stranger to for years, were beginning to revive those energies which had fallen asleep during his sojourns

in the moss-grown swamp near Shawnigan. But the secret of his real name, and of his own intimacy with the Verulams, did not leak out. He did not care to become a text for Victoria's gossips, or an object of their pity, so that he remained what Snape knew him as, a young fellow who had turned up on the island with a good deal of cash, gone the pace in Snape's set for one year, speculated by Snape's advice, and, indeed, on his urgent request at his own dinner-table; and then, of course, "gone broke," borrowed from his mentor, and remained his slave ever since. Thanks to the fact that just then the Verulams were the vogue in Victoria, a good many people came to call on the sick man; some kindly hearted folk who had always liked the boy for himself, and some portly flunkies of the local Cræsus who dropped their friends when Cræsus dropped them, and fawned on them again whenever Cræsus gave the hint. Altogether, what with the general regret that any one had saved "that swindler Snape," and the particular rejoicing at "the merciful providence which had spared our esteemed fellow-citizen," there was a good deal of interest excited in that boy Jones; and if he had only recovered before the Verulams had

invested all their money, or made it plain that they did not mean to invest any, it is not impossible that a place in the Lands and Works Department might have been found for him. But this sympathy, of course, did not affect business even in the case of Snape, who pushed on his foreclosure proceedings with exemplary promptitude, so that before Noel was up again "Little Kingdon," as he called his forest farm, had been sold at auction, and bought in by the highest bidder (Mrs. Snape), for a little more than half the debt upon it. For the present this satisfied Mr. Snape, especially as Verulam and Trevor Johns still had money to invest, and Noel Johns really had nothing, except the farm, worth seizing; but Snape by no means forgot that his unsatisfied claim against the man who had saved his life was good against all he had, or might hereafter become possessed of, in the province. To those who have followed this story so far, it may be interesting to know that "the block of land, part cleared and part beautifully timbered, with romantic English country dwelling-house, the property of a lady who finds it necessary to reside in the city," was sold a few months later to another young English-

man for two thousand dollars (half cash and the remainder at eight per cent.), "the amount of labour and taste lavished upon the place by the late tenant making it alone," as Mr. Snape naïvely remarked, "well worth the money."

And all this time whilst Noel lay sick, the old man was quietly going about the place, playing billiards in the club, loafing round tennis-lawns, and keeping his shrewd eyes very wide open indeed. In a week he saw that Snape and Co. were omnipotent in the town, that they had all the money at the back of them, all the brains in their pay, and that it would be hopeless for Noel to stay there if he meant to fight him; and that the boy would fight, if he had a chance, the old man knew very well.

"I had thought of buying your farm in, Noel," Verulam said to him, the day after the public sale; "but I thought better of it."

"Who bought it eventually?" asked Noel, with interest.

"Mrs. Snape, for six hundred dollars."

"For six hundred dollars! It's assessed at one thousand two hundred dollars, and her husband lent me one thousand dollars upon it. I suppose he

will sell it to some unfortunate new chum for about what I gave for it, and come down on me for the balance of my debt to him, whenever I own anything in this province worth attaching. I hope you won't think me an awful rogue, old man, but it strikes me that I am very unlikely to own anything in this province which Mr. Snape could attach."

"Small blame to you," replied Verulam. "Snape has had his full pound of flesh already. We must see if we cannot start you elsewhere, out of reach of this ring, as soon as you recover——"

"Eh!" ejaculated Noel. "What's that, old man? Do you want me to turn borrower again? and with no security at all this time?"

"Nonsense, boy," replied the old man hotly. "Pride is all very well, but not with your own people. If we have not a right to lend you a hand, who the deuce has? Your word is good enough for us."

"Yes, I know, you dear old chap, that you think so; but I don't. Noel Johns is going to make his own capital this time, and when he does he'll stick to it. But no more borrowing, not even from you."

And this was all that Verulam could get from the boy, but he was not disheartened by it. He had been accustomed for many a long year to rule as an autocrat at Kingdon, and had no idea of yielding on this point, even to his stubborn young friend; and Noel, knowing this, became restless and thoughtful again, except when Pussy and Trevor were present. Of course, they were with him every day, and on the evening after the old man's visit they were sitting by his bedside chatting as usual.

"Don't you think you could manage to walk now if you tried?" asked Trevor. "The doctor says that you are a lazy dog, and could walk well enough if you chose, though he wouldn't if he were in your place."

"What does Dr. Jack mean? Has any one told him that I have been trying to walk?"

"I don't know. But he says that Pussy is not to come here any more. If you want to see her you must come to us. 'If I could lie in bed, and have no worries, and be nursed by that girl, do you think I'd get well?—not much!' Those were his exact words. He did not mince matters to spare your feelings, Pussy."

Noel and Pussy both laughed a little nervously.

"Dr. Jack's speeches are like his surgery, there is no humbug about them. Even if they are a bit rough, they are wholesome," said Noel; "and I expect it is almost time for me to put my shoulder to the wheel again. Do you think, Pussy, that the old man is very angry because I would not let him 'finance' me, as they call it? He could not expect me to take his money, when I won't take my mother's."

"Do you mean that you have refused to take your allowance from home?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? Don't think me a quixotic fool; but I want work now, hard work, with no leisure. Work to make me forget."

"What is it that you are so anxious to forget, Noel?"

It was a foolish question, and one which need never have been asked, if those grey eyes had not been so full of another man's image; but he answered bravely—

"My follies, Puss, and my failures. I have to prove to my own satisfaction, that I am not the incompetent ass I appear to be; and the old man's

money would not help me to do that; but make my peace with him—bless him!”

Pussy laughed. “You may make your peace with him yourself, if you can get your way with him; no one else ever did,” she replied.

She remembered now a cablegram which the old man had sent to Mrs. Johns, and she understood what it meant. Noel’s will might be strong, but she felt satisfied that it would not be strong enough to escape from the protecting care of those who loved him.

She forgot that through long study Noel could read every thought in her mind through her eyes.

“Well, little sister, it is time for you to be going. You are dining out to-night. Don’t get too intimate with the financiers, Trevor.”

“Who told you I was dining with Snape to-night?”

“Oh, a little bird. Every one knows everything here. For instance, Pussy is *not* dining there, though you and the old man are.”

“No, I’m dining with Mrs. Bulley,” said the girl, flushing hotly. She wondered whether Noel, who seemed omniscient, knew that she had asked Mrs.

Bulley if she might dine with her, half an hour after she had received the Snapes' invitation.

The others might think it diplomatic to dine with that man. For her part, she would rather dine with the dogs. They, at any rate, were honest, and all of them, to a puppy, Noel's friends.

Noel smiled as he watched that sweet tell-tale face—

"Loyalty before all," he muttered; and then added aloud, "You are more of a Verulam than a Christian, I'm afraid, Pussy, after all. You don't forget your friends, and you can't forgive their enemies. Good night, dear, and good-bye, perhaps."

"Why good-bye?" asked the girl, holding his hand.

"Oh, I don't know. There is no limit to the autocratic powers of Dr. Jack. He might 'fire me out' before to-morrow morning, and send me goodness knows where."

The words were said in jest, but either there was a subtle tone of sadness underlying his laughter, which the girl's quick ear caught and understood, or else it was the prompting of that sixth sense,

which does exist, although we know so little of it; in any case, a sudden silence fell upon the three.

They had been together now for weeks, and a warm grip of the hand had been always sufficient to convey their feelings to each other.

To-day, for some reason which she could not have explained, the girl stood doubting, one hand in Noel's, the other in her lover's.

"May I, Trevor, for auld lang syne?" she asked simply, and reading his answer in his eyes, she bent over the hospital-cot, and pressed her pure young lips on the sick man's forehead.

The next moment she and Trevor had gone; and Noel Johns, white to the lips, sat up in his bed, staring blankly at the closed door.

"That settles it," he muttered. "I owe it to them, and I owe it to myself. My God, how she loves him!"

For a moment he lay still; then this sick man scrambled from his bed, and began hurriedly to throw everything which belonged to him into a tiny grip-sack, and afterwards to dress himself in the old blue overalls and grey flannel shirt of his ranching days.

Five minutes later he rang his bell, laid a note addressed to the doctor on his table, tossed his grip-sack into the grass under his window, and, when the nurse came, told her that, by the doctor's advice, he was going to try a little walk for half an hour on the path outside his window. Would she give him her arm down the steps, as he was a little weak still?

Nothing doubting, the nurse did as she was asked, and left him walking slowly up and down in the sunshine; but next morning, when Pussy came tripping down the corridor, her hands full of flowers fresh gathered for her friend, and a note from the old man offering to drive Noel home to their rooms for the rest of his convalescence, this same nurse met her with a strange story, which took all the buoyancy out of Pussy's step, all the light out of her beautiful eyes.

Noel had vanished. That was the substance of her story. He had gone out to walk, or try to walk for half an hour, and he had not come back again. He must have planned it all beforehand, the nurse added, because he had taken most of his things with him, and left a note for the doctor.

"But there, miss," she added, "it's no good

grieving. There's never any dependence to be placed on those remittance men."

Pussy did not stay to rebuke the woman. Why should she? She could not know that the remittance man—so Pussy thought—vanished because he was too proud to be dependent even upon his own people. Of course, Pussy herself never guessed Noel's real reason; and though, when Trevor told her at night that he and the old man had searched every hotel and lodging-house in the city, and searched them in vain, she laid her head on Trevor's shoulder and sobbed as if her heart would break, it was only for "the *brother*" who had so obstinately gone out again into the world without a word to them, without a coin, without a friend.

It was such a hideously great world, she felt, this new world in which he had lost his way. It was so easy in it to lose touch of those you loved, and her heart yearned for the old country, where men measure distances by hours, and not by days; where there are no trans-Continental railways, three thousand miles long, and where friends can never be really far apart.

The old man read his daughter's heart in her face.

He, too, had had enough of North America, and shared her longing to be at home. "He was too old to go hunting big horns with Trevor," he said; and so he and Pussy would make their way slowly home. Trevor could follow them with his trophies.

And to this Trevor consented; but if Pussy and the old man had guessed that the month to be spent hunting mountain-sheep would have been spent in speculation in mines, under the auspices of Colonel Gilchrist, it is doubtful whether either she or the old man would have shown so much "sweet reasonableness."

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

AT BATTLE CREEK.

"How, Billy! Can we come in? Gosh, how this wind cuts! Darned if I don't think one side of my face has froze."

The speaker had thrown the low door open, and bending his head to enter, had come into a square room of very considerable size, a good deal less than half furnished, in which a man sat on the edge of a trestle-bed, cleaning the lock of a carbine.

As the new-comer entered and stood stamping his feet to restore circulation in them, a rough wolf-hound jumped off the bed and growled, but the next moment put down his hackles, and laid his long muzzle confidently in the speaker's hand.

"Come here, Bran," cried the man on the bed; and then, looking up, added, "Why, is that you, Louis? Come in and warm yourself. Are you just in from Maple?"

"That's what, and not sorry to get in. I think I'd have lost my ears if I hadn't had the old cap on; these toques are no good in a wind." And so saying, he drew a red woollen toque from his pocket, and tossed it contemptuously on the table, after which he divested himself of a great fur cap which he had pulled down to his ears, and a pair of long-haired badger-skin gloves which came up to his elbows.

"No, they are not much account; but who is that you have got with you?" asked the other, as a second man came up to the door, and began to knock the snow off his boots on the threshold.

"A countryman of yours, I reckon, having a look round, and 'sizing' you up, before he puts in for five years of it. Johns, let me make you acquainted with Serjeant Stobart," replied Louis.

And as Noel came in, Stobart rose, a tall gaunt man, not unlike his wolf-hound in general outlines, and held out his hand saying, in a voice from which all accent seemed to have vanished as by magic—

"So you want to join the force, Mr. Johns, do you? You might do worse; it's lonesome at the posts sometimes, but there is a good deal to do, what with

cattle-thieves and prairie fires; and it's all clean out-of-doors work, which no man need be ashamed to do. But I expect you're starving, are you not? Go and warm yourself whilst I see after the grub. Hi, Ben," he added, raising his voice, "it's Louis and a friend. Shall you have some supper ready soon?"

"Right away," came the answer from another room, and the speaker, a tough-looking soldier in flannel shirt and long boots, followed his voice into the room, and after shaking hands with Louis, began to throw down knives and forks and plates upon the board, for, true to the traditions of the North-West police, he (being cook for the week) began to get some food ready as soon as he heard the wheels of Louis's waggon upon the road.

The North-West police have many and varied duties to perform, and the men amongst whom they live will tell you that they perform them all like white men, tracking and holding up horse-thieves, keeping the marches, or stopping a prairie fire, all as a matter of everyday business, and grumbling only when it falls to their lot to look after the sale of whisky in the saloons along the railway line.

Until very lately their powers were extremely full, entitling them even to hold up and confiscate a train upon the rails, if it should refuse to slow down and submit to inspection. But the duty which they perform most often, and with the greatest good will, is that of hospitality. In thousands of miles of rolling prairie, the North-West police are the only possible hosts. Luckily for them, their rations are so ample that they could never get through them unaided. As it is, in spite of the "dead beats," who drift about the boundary line; the would-be settlers prospecting for land; and casuals of all kinds, there is still something left for the coyotes and kitfoxes which hang round every station.

"What have you done with the waggon, Louis? I don't see it," said the cook, as he came in with a steaming dish of roast meat.

"Well, that's good!" laughed Louis. "I guess you boys had ought to know by this time. What does every fellow do who comes along your confounded trail?"

"Got stuck in the crossing, eh?"

"Got stuck! you bet I have, and taken my team

out, and left the blooming old waggon where she is, for you fellows to get out afterwards. Serve you right, for having such a trail."

Stobart laughed. Louis and he were old friends.

"I've half a mind to leave the waggon there all night, Louis. I would, only the kitfoxes would get away with the harness. But let us have the grub, Ben, and we'll go and hitch a team on and pull your cart out afterwards."

"Have you no Indians or thieves of any kind round here?" asked Noel, who knew that the waggon had been left in a water-hole nearly half a mile from the station.

"No; or, at least, if there are any, they wouldn't steal from us," answered the sergeant. "They would have too far to carry their plunder, and there's not covert enough to hide a coyote," and he pointed through the little square panes of the window over a long sea of grey, cheerless prairie, so bare that any object upon it was magnified by contrast with the dead unbroken expanse around, until a buffalo skull half a mile away looked as big as a house, and a badger as big as a bear.

"Now, boys, there's the hash; you'd better go and

sit round," remarked the cook. And then going to the door, he shouted—

"Guess if you fellows want a feed, you'd better come and get it now."

In spite of the cold and their hunger, Louis and Noel found time for a preliminary wash in the tin basin on the wood pile outside; but the two who answered Ben's last call had no use for soap and water, no time to waste in useless ceremonial. Without a word they slouched in, almost before the words were out of Ben's mouth, and took their places, helped themselves to what they could get, piling all kinds of victuals, meat, canned fruit, molasses and tomato-sauce on the same plate, and ate ravenously with downcast looks, and in silence unbroken by any attempt at conversation, or useless expression of gratitude. What they could get, they reached across the table for and got; what any one gave them, they took, and when they had eaten all they could, they rose and went out again.

As Louis came in, rubbing his red-brown cheeks with a rough towel, his keen, narrow eyes fixed on these men in a minute with a look of suspicion and inquiry, but he said nothing, and took his seat as if

they had not been there. Stobart and the cook meanwhile sat on the edges of their respective beds, whittling away at their plugs of T and B, keeping an eye on their guests' cups.

"Well, Johns, how does antelope hash go?" asked Louis, sticking his fork into another great slice, and conveying it to his plate. "Mighty good, isn't it?"

"I don't know what wouldn't be good now," replied Noel. He had every desire to be civil, but he could not for the life of him say more just then, for his jaws were aching with the attempt to masticate fresh-killed antelope meat.

"Been killing much game lately?" asked Louis.

"No, not much. The antelope are not down in the cypress hills yet, and the wolves have driven the deer out. I never saw so many wolves as there are about the country this fall."

"Big fellows?"

"Yes, big grey wolves. Bran and the bitch had more than they could manage with an old vagabond last week. He would have stood them off if I had not helped them with my revolver."

"Looks as if it was going to be a hard winter. Well," Louis added, pushing his plate away and

rising. "A fellow can't go on eating for ever unless he's an Englishman, eh, Johns? so I'll have a smoke; and then, Billy, you might come and help me with that waggon."

"All right, as soon as you please. Have you any mail for us?"

"No, there are no letters, but I think there's a package of newspapers. Come and see. It's not dark yet." And, opening the door, he went out, followed by Stobart.

As soon as they were outside, the scout's quick eyes turned towards the room they had left, and jerking his head in the direction of the table, he asked, "Who's them two?"

"Dead beats; came in yesterday," replied Stobart, dropping naturally into the scout's laconic style. "Say they've walked from the line; that's thirty miles. They've done seventy miles, according to their account, in two days, and had damned little to eat whilst they were doing it."

"One of them has a pretty face on him," remarked Louis. "He'd make a prairie wolf howl to look at him."

"Yes, he got that when he was chucked out of

a bar at Ophir; that's why they came across the line."

"Shooting scrape?"

"No; they didn't say so."

"Did they have any guns with them?"

"No. That is all the outfit they had. It isn't much." And the policeman pointed to two tiny bundles about a foot square and six inches through, thrown down against the wall of the house.

"Well, they don't look dangerous; and it don't matter to us what they did at Ophir, until we get orders about them; but we may as well keep an eye on them, in case they should be wanted. I suppose all is quiet about here? no horse-thieves been heard of lately?"

"No; there's nothing for you to do, Louis, and won't be for some time now, I expect. The next snow we get will lie, and then things will close up for the winter. I expect that that is about the last of those fellows we shall see this fall;" and Stobart pointed to a skein of geese high overhead, going south.

"Yes, it's coming, sure pop," said the half-breed, his eyes fixed on the sky-line. "I shouldn't wonder if it was to come to-night. Let's go and get that

waggon in anyway." And the two went off into the stable to harness four horses for the job.

On the way down to the mudhole in which the waggon had stuck, Louis asked the sergeant if he had heard any more of the sickness which had been talked of among the Indians.

"No," Stobart replied, "not a word. I had almost forgotten all about it. But you know how quiet they keep those things. Some one said it looked like small-pox again. Do you think there is anything in it?"

"Who knows? The wolves will want feeding anyway, and there are no buffaloes for them, and not many redskins," answered the scout, moodily. "It seems as if white men and Crees can't both live on these plains, though you'd think there was room enough too."

"Why, Louis, you don't go much on the Indians, do you?" asked Stobart, whose experience had taught him that the half-breed always prefers to be thought white.

"Not a great deal, but it's lonesome on the plains, too, nowadays. The buffalo has gone, and the elk and the antelope are going. D—d if I

think there'll be anything left but buffalo skulls and an odd coyote here and there soon."

"Aren't cattle better than buffaloes?"

"Maybe they are; but there aren't as many of them, and they want a sight more looking after. There'll be less cattle and more room for settlers, too, before this winter is over. If they didn't want it themselves, seems a pity that the whites drove the Crees and the game out of the country. There's too much room now——"

"Why, man, what's the matter with you to-night? You talk as if you had caught the sickness yourself," said Stobart.

The other did not answer for a while. He was a man whom the police knew well, and entirely trusted; a man to whom the vast seas of grass were as familiar as the ways of his village to a villager; a man of whom they all spoke in Assineboia as "white core through;" but for the moment the wild blood in him had asserted itself, and the sorrow of the widowed prairie land found utterance through his lips.

"I guess you're right, Billy," he said at last, with a short laugh; "a drink of whisky would do me good just now, though if it had not been for your

cursed whisky, and the diseases that came along with it, there would be no need to feel lonesome on the prairie."

"You should take a turn up at the Pinto Mine, if that's what you want. You can blow in a year's pay in a week there if you've a mind to. There's sure to be a saloon somewhere handy now they have begun work again."

"That is just what I'd like to do, Billy, but it's not my luck. The super can't spare me, he says; and he has sent me down here now to get one of you fellows to drive a stage down from that mine to the railway line."

"Why didn't he send Paul, if he can't spare you? I doubt if any of our fellows know the trail well, though of course they can find it."

Louis's eyes had a laugh in them, though his face remained as grave as ever. He had a very high opinion of the North-West Mounted Police, but, as path-finders, preferred his own people.

"Paul don't fancy the job. There are some pretty bad coulees between here and Pinto, and Paul never did care about handling a team. Who will you send?"

"I suppose I had better send Ben; it will just suit him as far as the driving goes. Is there much to come out from the mine?" Stobart added.

"They say so. This new outfit is making things hum. They took in all they wanted to, and now it seems they are going to begin to ship something out."

"What happened to the other fellows—the men in the first company that owned the Pinto? Did you hear?"

"Got froze out," replied Louis, laconically.

"Did you hear who they were?"

"The man who owned most of the stock, so they say down at Maple, was a Britisher. Of course he got left. The men who froze him out were land-sharks from the coast; some said from the Sound, some said from Victoria. I guess it will all be in the papers. We can look when we get this blooming waggon out. Git up, there! git, will you?" And Louis laid his whip heavily across the quarters of the wheelers, whilst Stobart urged on the leaders, until, after a great deal of floundering and splashing, the waggon was dragged by sheer force to dry land.

For a moment the horses stood panting after their

exertions, their hot breath going out in great white columns into the darkening night; then Louis and Stobart scrambled into their places, a whip cracked, and the team started for the station, as the scout expressed it "tickyety brindle."

Heaven only knows of what quaint, rustic phrase this was a corruption, or how it came from hawthorn-scented lanes to the mouth of a half-bred Cree, on the wind-swept plains of Assineboia.

CHAPTER II.

HOW SOME ENGLISHMEN MAKE THEIR PILES.

OF course the North-West Mounted Police have their head-quarters at Regina. Their drill-hall, officers' quarters, barracks, stores, and so forth, make quite an imposing show in the capital of Assineboia, but the force is only a thousand strong, all told; it has an enormous frontier-line to watch, and a few little odds and ends of work to do, such as to look after the Indians, and preserve order generally in the North-West.

Now, if anybody will take a map of the world and look at this North-West Territory, of which men speak flippantly, as if it were an unimportant district measured by acres, and will compare it with India, or even Australia, he will understand that a thousand men are hardly "enough to go round," and will not be surprised to hear that the various

posts along the line are so small that one containing half a dozen men is the exception.

Battle Creek was a more important post than most of its neighbours, and a better built one, but as Stobart and Louis rattled up to its doors, it would have seemed a lonely, miserable place to any eyes less used to it than theirs.

The low, square log-huts, with their mean, small-paned windows, looked utterly insignificant in the boundless waste in which they were set, without any trees to shelter them, or any neighbours to share the responsibility of their intrusion upon the wilderness, and the vagabond wolves and homeless wind which howled round the place, added nothing to its homeliness.

But inside, when the stove was all aglow, and pipes were lit, things improved a good deal. The comforts of these frontiersmen are not altogether neglected by those in authority. There is, for instance, a fair stock of books kept in circulation from post to post; *Harper* and the *Sketch* are not unknown; and the men themselves have a breed of hounds which give them all the sport they want. Noel Johns, who was sitting smoking, with old

Bran's head upon his knee, and an unopened *Field* by his side, was beginning to think that, in spite of the hideous ugliness of the world outside, Battle Creek might not be a bad place to live in, when one of the readers by the stove turned the current of his thoughts back to his old life and his old home.

"Weren't you fellows talking of the mine up near Pinto Horse Butte?" this man asked.

"Yes; Louis says that the super wants one of us to go up there and drive a stage down to the railway. I guess you'll have to go, Ben. Why, is there anything about the mine in the paper?" asked Stobart.

"Yes, in one of the Seattle papers. The Pinto Mine. That's it, I guess, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's it, right enough."

"Well, here's what the paper says"—and the speaker laid his pipe down, so as to give his reading fair play—"We are pleased to inform our readers that the splendid property known as the Pinto Mine, in Assineboia, has at last fallen into the right hands. Canadians, of course, know nothing of mining, and British capital is about as slow as the coming of judgment-day. Luckily for the Pinto Mine, it

has been secured by our enterprising fellow-citizen, Colonel Gilchrist, whose lovely and fascinating daughter is so well known in our best social circles. The Colonel is a rustler from away back, and a business man who takes no chances. Whatever he touches pays from the word "go," and his principal partner in this new venture, although not a Seattle man, is favourably known as one of the very few Britishers across the Sound who have had sense enough to catch on to American business principles. This gentleman, Mr. Snape, was in the original company, but seeing how things were likely to go, with a lot of incompetent dudes from the East and from England, to handle the business, he let go and unloaded just in time.

"We understand that some folk lost heavily; but we may congratulate ourselves that no one from this side got left.

"The concern was unlimited, and as most of the other people in it, after Mr. Snape let go, were not overburdened with cash, the principal loss fell upon one of those blue-blooded aristocrats from the old country (a Mr. Trevor Johns, of Cowley, England), who are trying to obtain the same pernicious

influence for their capital here which they have established for it in the British Isles. We say the loss could not have fallen upon more proper shoulders.'"

The reader here dropped the paper and took up his pipe again.

"Whew! that's pretty rough on the British capitalist," remarked Stobart. "Poor devil! it seems to me that they are always crying out pretty loud for him to come along, and when he is fool enough to come, they rob him first, and curse him for coming afterwards."

"That's so," put in Ben Sellick. "Yes, that's exactly so; and it's pretty much the same all over the West. We 'honk,' 'honk' for geese, and shoot the beggars when they come to us."

"What sort of liabilities do you suppose that company had?" asked Noel, after a pause.

"The Lord alone knows, and the liquidator," replied Stobart; "pretty big ones, probably, if a Britisher had to foot the bill. Why, by Jove! Johns, he wasn't a relative of yours, I hope, this Mr. Trevor Johns?"

"Yes; he is my cousin, and that scoundrel Snape

ruined me as he has ruined him," replied Noel, quietly.

"To hell with all real-estate agents!" said a voice from beside the stove; and the others, as they looked up into Bob Pickaxe's savage brown face, remembered his story, and joined in a hearty "Amen."

"I say, I am sorry for you, Johns, and for your cousin," said the sergeant, after a while. "I guess he will have to come into the police too, now. It is a rare home for broken men, if they are of the right sort. But perhaps your cousin will get level with his man yet."

"That's not likely. He does not understand how to play their games."

"Well, it's no use crying over spilt milk, only don't curse Canadians for it. I'll bet this Snape isn't a blue nose. Most of the scoundrels in that business are newly imported scum from the old country."

"That's how they get us," added Pickaxe. "Set a thief to catch a thief, and an Englishman to swindle an Englishman."

"True, more's the pity," Stobart assented. "These

sharks are born with their wisdom-teeth full grown, and have to file them down once a week, they keep growing so. Have you enough blankets, Johns? It gets pretty cold on the floor towards daybreak."

"Yes; I shall do all right, thank you," Noel answered.

"Then douse the glim; old Louis there has been snoring for an hour past. He takes no interest in real-estate agents. Every dollar he gets he puts into cattle, which he looks after himself. When he wants them he can catch them; when he doesn't he leaves the North-West Mounted Police to see to their safe keeping."

"And what do you put your dollars into, Stobart?"

"My pocket, until I get leave, and then they go on the faro table. As well there as anywhere else," replied the sergeant. "Good night;" and so saying he turned his face to the wall and slept.

There were six men in the room at Battle Creek that night, not counting the guests; and, out of the six, only one had been born in that state of life unto which it pleases God to call nine men out of ten; that is to say, only one had been born to work for

his own living, and yet a more careless, contented lot than the men of that outpost it would have been hard to find. If they had no money, at least they had no worries, and no neighbours whose wealth could contrast painfully with their own poverty.

Only Noel Johns lay awake on the hard deal floor, thinking of Trevor's loss, wondering at the folly of a man who would go to his ruin in spite of warning given, but grieving not so much for his cousin as for Pussy.

What would this mean to her? and how would Trevor take the buffet of fortune?

These were questions that kept him awake long into the night, and he could find no answers to them.

Of course Noel might go home; there would always be something left, and the "old man" would be able to find enough for two, if Trevor were to marry Pussy; and as for Pussy, Trevor's misfortune would make him doubly dear in her eyes, of that he had no doubt.

But Trevor was not the nature to take a blow without returning it. He had been spoiled by a too kind fortune, but Noel knew the savage Welsh blood

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had not lost all its fighting properties, although it had flowed so long in the quiet of a Berkshire village.

He hardly thought Trevor would care for the fool-hen's *rôle*.

CHAPTER III.

A DETERMINED GIBBER.

THERE is no doubt about the cold in the early morning at Battle Creek. Police blankets are, as the men say, "good and thick," and Noel had received a very generous share of them, but he had neglected to fasten down their edges, so that the little wind which comes before dawn, had crept in and chilled him to the marrow.

The station was made, like many of its fellows, by one of the scouts, an excellent rough carpenter, but distinctly somewhat rough; the doors did not fit the doorways with too nice accuracy, and no one, of course, in Assineboia would dream of trying to keep out the wind with list along the lintels, or sand-bags at the door's foot.

At first Noel dropped off into a sound sleep. The glow of the stove warmed him, and the other men's

snores made a lullaby for him, but as soon as the glow had faded from the stove he woke with a shiver. The stove was no longer bright with heat; there was a knot in the floor pushing its way into his hip-bone, and the prairie wind was fairly screaming under the doorway, and flowing in icy waves across the floor.

For hours, it seemed to him, he lay tossing on his bruised side, cursing the West, that country of great opportunities in which he and Trevor had come so hopelessly to grief, and longing for the cook to wake and "fire up."

At last he turned over on the broad of his back, and as there are no corners in one's back to be rubbed off against the boards, he soon passed again into dreamland.

But the cold and the eerie wind had given a hint to his brain, and sleep was worse than waking. At first his dreams were vague and formless, a mere howling of wolves or wind and a swift procession of figures, which he could not identify. But by degrees one form amongst these shifting shapes grew definite, and always in front, with a wild, hunted look distorting its handsome features, went

Trevor's well-known face. The shapes which followed changed so rapidly that he could not tell when they were one thing, when they were another, but whatever they were, fiends or wolves, or merely columns of drifting snow, they were always in pursuit, Trevor always but one step ahead.

Through it all Noel had that strange consciousness that he was dreaming, and at last by a violent effort roused himself and sat up. It was easy to convince himself of the unreality of his dreams as soon as his eyes were open; easy to identify the low-roofed room and the vague outline of the four other men sleeping around him; but the moment he lay back again and began to doze, a face came to him out of the gloom which had surely nothing to do with Assineboia. He could feel, as he lay there, a cool white hand upon his brow; he could see great coils of sunny hair, a small, graceful head, and tiny, shell-like ears, and, plainer than all, those glorious eyes out of whose grey depths a soul seemed pleading—pleading with a dumb earnestness which made his heart ache. He had no consciousness that he was dreaming now. This was real; all else was false. But what was it that *she* wanted of him? What were

those dear eyes asking for? Why did not those sweet lips speak? The questions maddened him almost as much as his own inability to speak or move. That is the worst of dreams.

You must lie like one dead, yet with the brain alive, striving to speak or move; but there can be no speech or motion until the dream passes and the sleeper wakes.

What if death should be like a dream, in which the brain understands enough to realize the horrors which surround it, in which the heart can still suffer, still desire to speak, though the tongue be dumb and the limbs frozen in an eternal frost?

Of course, just as he seemed on the point of solving the question, a voice broke in upon his slumbers, and he woke.

"Better get out of them blankets, boys, and give a fellow room to move around in," said the voice.

Ben Sellick was trying to make up the fire, and Noel's long legs were very much in the way of any one who wanted to come near the stove.

In a moment Noel was on his feet. He was only too glad of an excuse for shaking off the cold and

the misery of the dark hours, but it took him more than one day to banish the pleading look on that dream-face from his memory.

"I guess you found it pretty cold last night," remarked Ben; "the wind was blowin' right on to this side of the shack, and a fellow catches all there is of it there on the floor."

"Yes, it was pretty cold, and I'm not sorry to get up," Noel owned. "Shall I go and chop some wood for you?"

"No; that job's taken. I guess Louis thought he might as well set his blood a movin' that way; but you can go and see if he'll give you a turn at the axe. I'll have a fire and grub ready in a brace of shakes."

But Johns did not care to wait even a brace of shakes. What with his dreams, and that wind at dawn, his teeth were absolutely chattering; so he rose and passed out through the outer room to the yard beyond. As he did so he saw the two dead beats sitting like two crows on a bench against the wall, as usual neither speaking nor doing anything."

"Good morning," he said cheerily as he passed;

but he might as well have spoken to deaf-mutes, for they neither answered nor moved.

Outside he found his friend the scout, in his shirt-sleeves, making the chips fly. If any one could thrive in such a cheerless world, that stalwart red-brown fellow looked as if he could.

"Good morning, Louis."

"Good morning; so you know enough to work to get warm! Want the axe?"

Noel took it and soon restored circulation, and began to think better of the world, even the northwest quarter of it.

"I say, Louis, don't those fellows ever open their mouths except to put food in?" he asked after a while, jerking his head towards the room in which the dead beats sat.

"Don't seem like it," retorted the scout. "Sit there like a couple of starved coyotes on their tails waiting for some one to chuck 'em a bone. I don't cotton to those fellows much."

"You'd have thought the beggars would say 'thank you,' for their bed and board; but they didn't say a word that I heard last night."

"No, nor won't. But that don't signify here.

Lots don't. You see, it's kinder natural just to drop in and get fed. Every one does the same here. But I shall ask Stobart to drop 'em a hint to hit the trail again to day."

And so after breakfast he did, and the tramps took the hint, and after a while tied on their tiny wallets and slouched off without a word of thanks, without a smile, without a sign of any kind—with no money, no plans, no goal as far as any one knew; and Noel stood watching them for a couple of miles going slowly across the level plains, not walking side by side, never apparently speaking to one another, not even having the appearance of being companions in misery, but just two meaningless, aimless human atoms, drifting God knows where or why.

Turning to the sergeant, Noel asked him if he had found out anything about his two guests.

"Not much," he answered. "I had to post them up in my diary, so I got Ben to ask them their names. The short one was 'Oly Olsen,' as near as Ben could get at it, a 'Swede or a Russian, or some bloomin' foreigner,' Ben said; and they both came from Ophir, and mean to make Maple Creek to-night."

"Maple Creek to-night? Why, it's forty miles to

Maple Creek!" cried Noel. "And that's not the way to Maple Creek, is it?" and he pointed the way the two men were going.

The sergeant looked up (he was busy mending harness at the time), and as he did so his face wore a puzzled expression.

"No, by Gad! it isn't. I'll have to tell Louis about that; though, after all, I don't suppose it matters a great deal. Poor devils!"

And that, for the moment, was the last of Oly Olsen and his mate: just two tiny figures on the skyline, tramping into space. The longer one lives out West, the more one is struck by the extraordinary passion for wandering which seems to possess men who have once crossed the plains. It is the same in all prairie countries; certainly it is the same on the steppes of Russia. The great "beyond" which lies behind the skyline has an irresistible fascination. As Rambaud, the historian of Russia, finely says, "The mountain keeps her own, the mountain calls her wanderers to return; while the steppe, stretching away to the dimmest horizon, invites you to advance, to ride at adventure, to go where the eyes glance." In some parts of the north-west of the States, whole

families may still be seen indefinitely migrating—'going up to spawn,' as the settlers say. One typical instance occurs to me as I write, in which an old man of seventy was encountered trekking for the land beyond the skyline from a comfortable homestead in Illinois, sufficient to keep him and all his brood in plenty for the rest of his life, and all because he had "heerd tell that there was nation fine land to be taken up somewheers away back in Washington territory."

But Noel had been speculating long enough on tramps and their ways, and the old sun had already made such a good start upon his daily round that Stobart was beginning to get impatient with Ben.

"Now then, Ben, if you are going to pull out to-day," he was saying, "it's about time you quit."

Ben looked surprised. He was not an irritatingly active man. His favourite scheme of life was to sleep until breakfast-time, smoke until lunch, take a turn, perhaps, at something useful to get an appetite for dinner, and then return to tobacco and his blankets.

"All right, if you say so, sergeant; but did

Louis say as it mattered when I went up for that stage ? ”

“ Yes, you bet he did. Said it mattered a whole heap. You ought to be at Farwell to-night, and at the mine to-morrow. I doubt you can’t do it.”

“ Guess I’d better hitch up, then,” remarked Ben, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. “ Which horses shall I take ? ”

“ Best take Frank, and that grey horse, Sam,” replied Stobart. “ They will do you all right from here to Farwell, and you can swap teams there.”

“ Don’t Sam gib a bit at a hill ? ” asked Ben.

“ He used to,” Stobart admitted ; “ but I think he has forgotten that trick by now. He hasn’t been driven for quite a while.”

“ All right, then, I’ll try the son of a gun,” said Ben ; and he slouched off to the stables to “ fix up ” his team.

In half the time which an English groom would have taken to harness one horse, Ben had hitched up his team, and was round again at the station door with a big lumbering waggon and two goodish-looking horses.

"Say, Johns," he called, "you ain't doing anything particular; you'd better come along. You'll get to know the boys at Farwell, and if you're coming into the force, you may as well do that now as later."

As Ben said, Noel was doing nothing particular, so that he really felt that he might as well earn his next day's food by lending Ben a hand.

"All right, I'll come. I'll be in at Maple in a week, Louis; and you might just mention me to the superintendent, and tell him I'd like to be taken on when I come in, if you fellows will have me."

"I'll tell him, and you bet your life he'll take you on. You're about the sort we want," added the scout, approvingly. "You're sure you know the way, Ben?"

"Trust me for that; I've travelled it before."

"With another chap to show it to you," muttered Louis, who didn't believe much in white men's knowledge of the plains. "Well, you won't be there to-night, anyway," he added, looking critically at the sun's position in the heavens.

"Shan't I? then I'll crowd it so almighty close there'll be nothing much between me and it,"

retorted Ben. "Git, you critters," he added, cracking his whip. "Bye, boys;" and the old waggon rattled and bumped over the rutty track to such an extent that Noel couldn't keep his pipe between his teeth. As it fell with a crash on the boards of the waggon, Ben took out a cake of chewing-tobacco.

"Take a chew of that," he remarked, offering it to his companion. "Pipes are no account on duty. You can't keep 'em in your mouth in a waggon, they burn out in no time in a wind, and freeze to your lips in a frost. Chewing is the only thing for a scout."

But Noel was not to be persuaded. A mere matter of prejudice, of course; but chewing still seemed to him as filthy a habit as smoking did to our ancestors.

Mile after mile the waggon bumped along, the horses going now at a slow trot, where the track was fairly smooth, now walking as the road got rougher and more hilly, now taxing Ben's skill and strength to the utmost, when the waggon pressed hard on the horses down the side of a steep gully.

"'Minds me of old Paul, this does," remarked Ben, as he pulled up at the bottom of a steeper pitch than usual, to negotiate which in safety he had been obliged to drive straight through a thick patch of scrub, the boughs of which made a natural brake for his waggon.

"Why of Paul?" asked Noel.

"Why, Paul, you know, don't care about drivin' four horses, an' always gets out and walks, drivin' 'em afoot downhill even now; but when he first came to this country he knowed nothin' about 'em at all. He was out drivin' with Louis one time, and they came to a pretty bad pitch, and Louis, he wanted to rig up a break of some kind. 'What do you want a break for?' asks Paul. 'To make us go slow downhill, of course, you chump,' says Louis. 'That's easy,' says Paul; 'you don't want no brake for that. Here's the hobbles here; let's hobble 'em. Ho, ho! Let's hobble 'em!'"

Though Noel saw the joke, he could quite appreciate Paul's scruples about the driving of a four-in-hand down gullies; but he had still a good deal to learn.

The afternoon had already begun to turn to

evening, and there was still no sign of any of the landmarks which Ben had spoken of.

"You're sure we're on the right road, Ben?" he asked.

"Of course we are. What do you take me for?" asked his Jehu. "We shall come to old man Hall's cabin in half a mile or so."

But they didn't, nor did they come to it in an hour or an hour and a half; and then the dusk began to fall.

"It's further than you thought, Ben," suggested Noel.

"Yes, it's a bit further," admitted Ben. "I guess I've miscalculated the distance a bit. It's two years since I was along this trail."

This didn't sound reassuring, especially as the dark had now really caught them, and the wind had begun to shriek, as it only can on uplands of the north-west prairies.

Above them was a skyline, a hilltop, from which Ben was certain they would see the station; but it was a long pull up to it, and long before they reached it, Sam gibbed. At first Ben treated this lightly, but he could not overcome it. Sam gibbed,

and steadily refused to go another yard, and the waggon was too heavily loaded for one horse to pull it.

"Guess we must rest him a spell," remarked Ben, and, dismounting, philosophically proceeded to light his pipe. But the rest was of no avail, and when the two men got out and walked, to lighten the load, it made no difference. For over an hour they fought with that horse, trying in every way to induce him to pull, if only to the top of the hill, and, though good-tempered enough at first, it was at last all Noel could do to prevent the policeman from shooting the "contrary son of a gun" in the traces. Coaxing having failed, they tried the whip, but that only made matters worse, and then a wind like the beginning of a blizzard came screaming over the top of the bluff and froze them to the marrow.

"Say here, take my rifle," said Ben, at length, "and let it off right close behind the beggar's ears. See if that'll stir him. Let me ketch hold. Now let her rip."

Noel did as he was bid, and at the first discharge the horse made a plunge forward, and for a hundred yards or so Noel saw horses and waggon going in

breakneck fashion "all over the place." But the spurt was only a short one, and each succeeding shot elicited less and less response from Sam; and even when Ben took the rifle himself in one hand, whilst he held the reins with the other, and fired shot after shot from the box until his magazine was empty, right over the gibber's ears, he gained very little by his expenditure of ammunition.

It seemed as if they would have to make a night of it on that high bluff, with half a blizzard blowing, and snow falling, and to avoid this Noel was ready to risk anything; for to be caught in a real blizzard night mean the loss of a good deal more than a meal and a night's rest.

"Take the brute out, and I'll ride him on to the station," he suggested.

"You couldn't ride this brute. No man could, *or* the other. They're mates for that. They'd either of 'em buck a man so high he'd never come down," replied Ben; "but you might walk on, and see if you can see anything from the top of the bluff."

"All right, I'll go," said Johns, and tramped out into the dark, losing waggon and horses and all in thirty paces. But he could see nothing of the

station, and after a while he feared he'd lost the waggon, until nearly half an hour later, looking back in the mist, now lit by starlight after the snowstorm, he saw a gigantic figure come over the top of a rise against the sky, and after a moment of doubt recognized Ben and his team. At last the driver had persuaded the driven to move, but at what cost of strong language Noel never knew. What he did know was that the stock of Ben's carbine was smashed to atoms, and certain contusions next day showed that Sam's hide had been in contact with something harder even than a prairie-bred cujuse. A five-mile tramp from the top of the bluff took the two to old man Hall's cabin, which had been half a mile off, according to Ben, half an hour before Sam began to gib; but though they reached Farwell in time for breakfast next morning, Noel felt that Louis's contempt for white prairie pilots was not without reason.

CHAPTER IV.

AT FARWELL OUTPOST.

ONE station in the nor'-west is much like another. The same lone lorn square cottages stand in every case upon much the same waste of dry yellow grass, or appear stranded in a white sea of snow which makes the eyes ache with its blinding brilliancy. But Farwell in the sun of early morning had a cheerier look than most of them, and was palatial by contrast with "old man Hall's." On the roof, within arm's reach, lay half a dozen skulls of deer and antelope; and over one of the doors some one had nailed a huge bleached buffalo skull, killed before the last of these beasts swam the Saskatchewan and disappeared in 1885. In spite of these trophies, as far as the eye could see (and it can see very far indeed in the Cypress Hills), there was no trace of

life round Farwell. In the old days, looking from the post across the plains, you might have seen a band of wapiti feeding in the distance, or far away beyond the stream you would have noticed that the yellow plains were starred with puffs of dust. These puffs of dust marked the spots where the old bulls lay wallowing. Now there were neither bull buffaloes nor wapiti; even the bones of the one and the horns of the other are getting scarce, except where they are piled along the railway track for export to manure-manufacturers.

Inside the post, when Ben arrived, it was almost as still as on the plains. The fire was burning, so that it was evident that some one was still about the place; but the rooms were all empty, and it was not until Ben had shouted himself hoarse that any one appeared to answer his summons. Then a stout-built, middle-aged man, hall-marked "Tommy Atkins," put in an appearance.

"What in thunder are you raisin' Cain about?" he asked. "Don't you know enough to walk inside and help yourself, if you want anything, Ben, or do you want a couple of chaps to wait on you?"

"Why, yes, Tommy, I guess I know my way in;

but what's up? Where's the boys?" asked Ben, in a conciliatory tone.

"Gone scoutin'," replied Atkins. "Some Yanks has gone and killed a fellow over at Ophir, and as their own police couldn't catch them, but let them slip over the line, we have got to turn out and do their dirty work for them," growled Tommy.

"Then are you left alone?" asked Ben.

"Just me and Bob. Bob's inside mindin' the horses; but get in and warm yourselves, and I'll see to your team."

After a few minutes' absence, Tommy returned in somewhat better temper, for this ex-trumpeter in the Royal Horse Artillery was glad enough to see a new face, though it would have been contrary to his nature to show his pleasure.

"What was that you said about a shooting-scrape at Ophir?" asked Ben.

"Why, that chap Sword has got wiped out at last, and served him d—d well right, by all accounts."

"What, Sword the road-agent?"

"That's him. Seems he was running a tony saloon at Ophir, and no one took any notice of him until a pal of one of the fellows he killed away back

in the seventies, came along and blew his waistcoat in with a charge of slugs."

"But they won't hang the fellow for that. That's common justice," ejaculated Ben.

"That may be, but it ain't regular."

"It doesn't seem very regular to leave a notorious murderer and train-thief unmolested for years under the very nose of a judge," remarked Noel.

Old Tommy looked up at this, and seemed to recognize Noel's presence for the first time.

"That's like the blamed conceit of a tenderfoot, ain't it, Ben?" he remarked, turning to Sellick. "Perhaps you'd tell us what you think as they'd do if they were to catch the chap who shot Sword," he added, in a tone of withering contempt, to Noel.

Although half inclined to resent the old man's manner, Noel only laughed at it. "Why, I suppose that as there is some justification for the act, they wouldn't hang him."

"They might, and agen, they mightn't. I guess his would be a ticklish position. The *first* killin' is always a bit risky. You might hang for that, though of course, if you have any money, you ain't anyways likely to. The second killin's safer. You

may be made city marshal for that; but if you're lucky, and kill three men, you *are* city marshal as sure as hell."

"You've got it figured out pretty correct, Tommy," Ben assented. "You didn't calculate, I suppose, how many killings it would take to make a judge, did you? Say, Johns, I wonder if those beauties who stopped at Battle Creek had any share in this business. They came from Ophir."

"And didn't go right on to Maple, as they said they intended to," added Johns.

"Did they tell you as they came from Ophir?" asked Tommy.

"Yes, that's what they said."

"Then I guess they lied. If they had come from Ophir, specially if they had had anything to do with Sword, they wouldn't have told you they came from there. Done something else, I guess, just as bad. Got born when they weren't wanted, or chucked a good thing when they had it, or wouldn't stand still to be shot at, or some fool's trick or other."

"You ain't cheery this morning, boy. What's the trouble?" asked Ben.

But the ex-trumpeter made no intelligible reply.

He had not had his morning ride yet, and this horse-breaker to the force had still a large stock of ill temper on hand, which it would take a really "mean" buck-jumper half an hour to get rid of.

Ben and Noel could hear him knocking the sauce-pans and frying-pans about in the kitchen for ten minutes after he left them, as if they were live things which had annoyed him.

"What is the matter with the fellow?" asked Johns, as soon as it was safe to speak; "is he always like that?"

"Pretty nigh always. Tommy's a first-rate good chap, but there's no denying that he's a bit of a crank. He's always specially cranky when there's been a killin'."

"What, is he bloodthirsty? He doesn't look it."

"No, and he ain't. That's not his ticket at all. Tommy is just the other way. If the Yanks only got the fellows as Tommy held up for them, they'd get almighty few. But there he goes to the horses, so I can tell you what is the matter with Tommy. Wait till I light up, though;" and digging out an ember, Ben lit his corn-cob pipe, and composed

himself for a yarn, whilst the water in the billy was a-boiling.

"Tommy came to us from the States, you know. He was one of those chaps who declare their intention of becoming American citizens, when they never have no intentions of the kind. His fad is that we have all been learned the wrong rules for this country, and that's why the Yanks get away with us.

"But it would be against nature if Tommy didn't think so, 'cos he was fool enough to try to buy land in Uncle Sam's country, instead of getting it given to him under his own flag. And that wasn't the worst of it. Darned if he didn't go and marry an American woman, and a widow woman at that. Well, of course it didn't take long for what Tommy swears the lawyers call "uncomfortability of temper" to set in atween those two, and when she wouldn't let him have no beer, and wanted him to deed all his property over to her, Tommy said he'd see her further first. Then the scrap began.

"She got the drop on him, of course—that's in the blood—and potted him in the back, from a doorway, before he knowed the action had commenced; the

next shot she raised his hair, and the third would most likely have finished him, and got her photo into the New York *Police News*, only, as bad luck would have it, Tommy had got *his* gun by that time, and rattled her badly by shooting over her head. Then he got a chance, and grabbed her weapon, lit out before the neighbours came around to lend her a hand, and got clear off. But she's been suin' him for alimony, or somethin' of that sort, ever since, and as she can't get anything out of Tommy, she just freezes on to his land. They say as poor old Thomas up and told the judge that he thought there had ought to be a close time for husbands, but I guess the judge was a bachelor, for he give it agen Thomas, and Thomas has had a down on judges and American law ever since. You bet the boys left him here because they knowed he would let any dead beat go who had happened to break the law across the line."

"I'm not so sure that I blame him," was Noel's comment, when Ben had finished his story; "but I think he is coming across the yard now, and I know the billy is boiling, so we had better set to, if you really mean to get to the mine to night."

"You bet I mean to. It's only twenty-five miles from here to East-end Post, and fifteen on from there. But I know a short cut that misses East-end Post. That way it won't be more than thirty-six miles."

"Quite enough too," muttered Johns.

"We've got to do it or bust, boy. What do you say, Tommy? Can we make the mine to night, with that team of yours?"

"Make it? Yes, make it easy before dark," he replied; and the event proved that he was right.

CHAPTER V.

THE STAGE HELD UP.

"GREAT Scott! it's a weight, boy!"

Ben Sellick was the speaker. He and Noel Johns between them were straining at a moderate-sized iron-bound chest, which, to judge by their efforts, was abnormally heavy for its size.

"You may say that without lying, Ben," remarked an onlooker; "but I guess Snape's heart would be a deuced deal heavier if you lost it."

"I suppose," replied Ben. "But we don't calculate to lose it, sonny."

"Well, look out for road-agents. Sword may not be the last of the gang. You've got some shooting-irons along, haven't you?"

"I've got my carbine; brought it on the off chance of seeing an antelope; but I expect Stobart and those dogs of his have hunted them all out of the country."

"Yes, they're about as scarce as road-agents. Are you all right now?"

"All except the mail-bag. Chuck that in."

The mail-bag was thrown in, the coach door closed, pipes were lighted, and then Ben and Noel climbed up to the box-seat. The coach which had been built to run on the old Cariboo road, was a covered concern, not unlike the famous Deadwood coach, made to contain eight or ten passengers. But the passengers' seats were empty. The treasure-chest and the mail-bag had the inside of the coach to themselves, and there was no one who wanted a share of the blankets in which Noel and Ben were enveloping themselves.

"That carbine is going to be awfully in our way," remarked Noel.

"Can't you fix it between us?" asked Ben.

"Not well. It will keep shifting as soon as we begin to move."

"Then shove it under the seat. If we do see an antelope, we can get it out in time."

"Is all set?" the driver asked, gathering up his reins.

"All set," Noel replied. "Good-bye, boys."

The long lash flew out and cracked viciously in the frosty air; the four lean-looking screws gave a preliminary exhibition of their desire to go in different directions, and then realizing the futility of their efforts, settled down to business, and pulled the old stage out on to the prairie. Surely there never was a stage which creaked and groaned as that one did. It had been laid aside for so long that it probably resented this return to active life. Its voice, at any rate, was not an enlivening element in that morning's drive.

A week spent cruising about in the Cypress Hills had to some extent acclimatized Noel to their dreariness, but when the coach left Pinto Mine, there was an ugly look about the sky which he had never seen in it before. A dense grey cloud was creeping over everything, so that sky and prairie, as far as you could see, was all becoming of one tone and one colour, except where, away to the east, a narrow rim of yellowish light, not unlike the "ice glint" of the arctic circle, showed low down on the horizon.

Such wind as there was came in short and uncertain puffs, but what there was of it was of such a penetrating keenness that, in spite of his

wraps, it chilled Noel to the marrow before Pinto was out of sight. But it takes some time to lose sight of Pinto on the prairie, and the travelling for the first mile or two was very slow, on account of the deep drifts into which the first light snow of the season had been blown.

"There is not much of it yet except in these dog-goned drifts," muttered Ben, as they weltered through one of them, "but there is more of it to come, and that, too, uncommon soon," he added, drawing on his huge badger-skin gloves, and looking nervously at the horizon.

Noel, for the first time in his life, was beginning to wish himself back again in the shelter of a British Columbian forest. Sal lal bush, six feet high, is very provoking, but even a canyon full of sal lal is not as bad as the treeless uplands of Assineboia, when the wind is rising, and the thermometer has fallen about as low as it conveniently can. Unfortunately for him, Noel was not equipped for the Nor'-West. He had needed no winter gear upon Vancouver Island, and had had no money to buy any with since he left British Columbia. So he buttoned a blanket coat which

he had borrowed, up to the chin, sat on his hands to keep them warm, and shivered until his teeth chattered, for at every bump of the stage the rugs flew apart, and let in the bitter prairie wind which numbed whatever it touched.

There were other signs, besides those in the sky, of the coming of the real winter of the Nor'-West. Two or three times during the morning the coach passed bands of cattle bearing the Crane Lake brand, but they were all either sheltering in the coulees or strung out across the plain, heading steadily for home without stopping even to graze by the way.

"It's coming, sure as death," muttered Ben, "and it's just like my cursed luck to get caught in it. But, say, Johns, if the cold nips you so, why don't you ride inside? You don't help me any, sitting here."

"But how about the wraps, Ben?"

"Oh, you just take your blanket and leave me mine. I'd a deuced deal rather have one to myself than my share of two," said Ben, pulling up his team, and beginning to rearrange matters to his satisfaction.

"Shall I take the carbine inside?" asked Noel.

"No; leave her where she is. Once I'm fixed to rights, I wouldn't get down for the biggest bunch of antelope I ever saw."

Noel looked at him and believed him.

His carbine was tucked away for safety under his feet. The collar of his great fur coat was tied securely with a piece of rope's end round his throat; another piece of rope's end confined it at his waist, while over all he had rolled his blanket, until he looked more like an Egyptian mummy than a mounted policeman. The nose—though naturally a ruddy one—which just showed between his fur cap and his coat collar, was already sufficiently corpse-like in colour to increase his resemblance.

When Noel had settled himself in his corner of the coach, old Ben turned stiffly round again in his seat; put a quid of tobacco between his teeth, and then shut his mouth permanently for the rest of the drive. He felt that he was in for it, and was prepared to rough it. Like the proverbial Texan steer, he had never died in a winter on the range yet, and guessed he'd pull through this time, too, "though he might be a bit poor at the finish."

Men who have these long, slow drives to make seem to acquire a power of suffering without thinking; of sending their minds away into space, and leaving their bodies to take care of themselves, until the bad times have passed. Ben Sellick had driven over many a thousand miles of prairie in his time, and had really *seen* very few of the miles he had driven over. He had driven for the most part as he was driving now, with his physical eyes open enough to warn him of danger, and to enable him to guide his team, but with his mind a comfortable blank, past which mile after mile of grey prairie and greyer sky passed unnoticed and unremembered.

On his way back from the Pinto Mine, Ben thought it better to take the trail past the East-end Post, and there change horses; but though he changed his team, and lit his pipe at East-end, he would neither stop to eat, nor get down to warm himself by the stove.

"No, no, boys, we are best as we are," he said; "and there's no time to waste in fixing ourselves up again. It's all we can do to make Farwell, and if we don't make Farwell to-night, I don't know as you'll ever see your team again."

The man to whom he spoke looked for a second or two at the horizon, and then, thinking apparently that Ben was right, sang out some orders to one of his fellows, and had the old team out of the shafts, and the new team in, almost before Ben's numbed fingers had cut up a pipeful of "plug."

Following Ben's advice, Noel remained curled up in his corner, so that he saw nothing of the men of the East-end Post, except the sergeant, who gave him a light as he lay huddled up in his blanket.

And then they were off again, bumping and jolting from side to side, hour after hour, through a world which was absolutely monotonous; the only moving thing between the grey of the sky and the grey of the prairie being themselves and a few drifting snow-flakes, forerunners of what was to come.

A conviction began to grow upon Noel that the whole drive was a nightmare, and that if he could only give himself the necessary shock, he would wake and be rid of it. The shock came at last, but was administered from outside. For the last half-hour there had been a long black line ahead of the

horses, cutting the grey of the prairie with strange distinctness. As they drew near, the black line showed itself to be a fringe of cypress trees, running along the edge of a big coulée almost large enough to deserve to be called a valley. The banks of this coulée were steep on both sides, but on the further side the ascent was so much steeper than the descent had been, that, though Ben sent his horses down at a hand gallop, the impetus of their descent hardly carried them halfway out of the coulée. Just as they stopped of their own motion, a harsh voice rang out with strange distinctness from the bank above—

“Hold up there!”

They are three little words, but under certain circumstances they have a terrible significance. Brave men have trembled at them in every State in the Union.

By a natural instinct Ben's hand strove to get to his hip-pocket, but even had there been no rifle bearing upon him, he could not have reached it under thirty seconds, so wrapped and swathed in blankets was he.

The cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he

remembered where his carbine was, and that Noel was as helpless as himself.

"Drop those reins and hold your hands up. One! two!——"

It was more grace than ninety-nine stage robbers in a hundred would have given to a victim, and had Ben Sellick been less securely caught in the folds of his own blanket, the delay, though momentary, would have cost the highwayman dear. But Ben had laughed at the idea of being held up, and had thrown caution to the winds, so that plucky as he was, he had to drop the reins, and hold up his hands before the fatal "three!" was pronounced.

As he did so, he saw on the brow of the bank above him, a screen of cypress boughs, and protruding through them what looked like the barrels of three rifles, all bearing on the box-seat of the coach. The policeman was a brave man, but as he looked down the barrels of those three rifles, his heart sank into his boots. Death is not good at any time, and death in the gloom of those cypress trees, with night falling, and that shrieking wind for his mourner, seemed peculiarly uninviting. Ben shuddered, but he made another effort to save his employer's gold.

Had he had his horses on the flat, he would have whipped them up and taken his chances. Three bullets *might* miss him if the team got off at once; but here, with horses blown, a steep bank to climb, and snow drifted two feet deep in front of him, it would have been suicide to try to bolt.

He knew this, but he didn't like giving in for all that. "Quit foolin'," he said steadily; "do you think I can't see as it's only an umbrella, or some damned thing that you've got there? And if there is one gun on me, there's another on you in the coach."

It was a sudden inspiration, and the road-agent's quick turn of the head might have given Ben a chance to change places with him *if* he had had a gun handy; but he hadn't, so the chance was lost, and the voice from behind the screen sounded more imperatively than ever.

"Get down, and put that chest out," it growled; and Noel, who was wide awake and listening now, thought that the voice seemed a feigned voice. "There are three rifles on you; if you don't get down pretty lively you shall hear their music. Jim," the voice added, "drop that leader if he tries

to bolt; Mike, keep your eye on the passenger; I'll take care of the driver."

Noel wasn't sure whether he heard an answer or not. The wind was shrieking so loudly now, that you could only catch the general drift of the first man's commands, but he was evidently giving his orders to his mates behind the drift, on his right and left; and Ben, remembering that the whole history of American stage-coach robberies shows no single instance of wavering on the part of the road-agents, got sullenly down into the road, and waited for orders.

The whole success of a road-agent depends upon one well-understood rule—he never makes a threat which he is not prepared to carry out. Once he has the drop on you, his orders are "hands up," and they must go up without hesitation, or the least little contraction of the muscles of his forefinger will send you to kingdom come. His life or yours are the stakes on the table, and he knows it; and there is no man alive to-day, so quick that his hand could reach his hip-pocket, before a man "having the drop" could press the trigger. It's easy enough when you are not held up, to talk of what you

would do if you were; when you are held up, you must submit to the ignominy of holding up your hands like other people, or you must die, and it hardly seems worth while, when the time comes, to die for a roll of greasy bank-notes.

All this Ben knew; but as he stood in the road, his mind was busy trying to think of some ruse to save Snape's gold.

But it was no good.

"Tell that passenger to get out," said the voice; and Noel had to crawl out and stand humbly before the cypress screen.

"Is he from the mine?" the voice asked.

"No," answered Ben; "he's in the force."

"Stand out and show your face," said the voice; and Noel had to obey.

"Isn't Snape along?" asked the voice, after a moment's pause.

"No; he went out last week by Swift Current."

"Damn him!"

Noel started. There was no doubt about the change in the voice; there was a clear ring in that heartfelt curse, with no feigned hoarseness in it, and, strangely enough, the voice seemed familiar to Noel.

However, when the man spoke again it was in his feigned voice: at least, the voice was as deep and hoarse as ever.

"Put out the chest on the road," it said; and Ben, feigning to misunderstand him, put out the mail-bag.

"No no urse you. Put out the chest, if you care to ' and at last, sorely against his will, Ben Sellic agged his charge into the middle of the road.

"Now turn your horses round, and don't try to get out sight. That will do," the voice continued, as Ben obeyed. "Now then, you there, get in," it said to Johns, "and a word to both of you. Drive those horses as if hell was behind you, back to the mine. Tell Snape, when you see him, that the gold has gone to where it came from. Stop, or look round, and it will be your own funeral. Quit!" and as he ceased speaking a flame shot out from the darkness of the screen, a report rang through the narrow valley, and a bullet hissed spitefully just over the quarters of the wheelers.

"A hint to hurry up, curse him," muttered Ben. "It will be our turn by-and-by," and lashing the



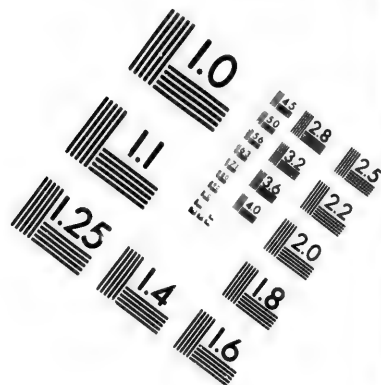
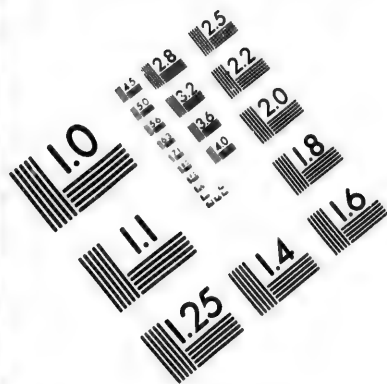
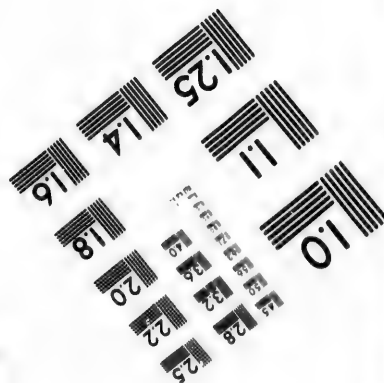
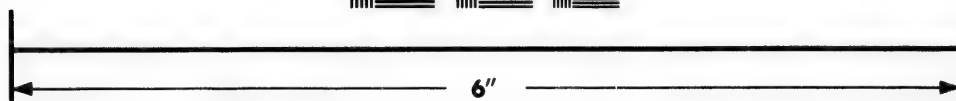
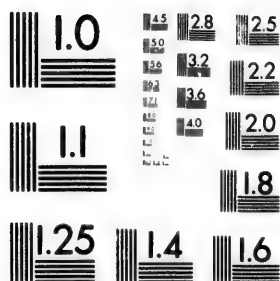


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frightened horses into a break-neck gallop, he dashed out of the ravine, and put their heads straight for East-end, whilst two more shots rattled over the coach in quick succession.

In his humiliation one thought consoled Ben Sellick. He had left the gold and the mails, with which he had been entrusted, in the middle of that dark ravine, and with them his own reputation. But the East-end Post was barely nineteen miles away (Farwell was only six, but that, alas! was in the wrong direction); and there he would find arms and friends who would hunt the road-agent until they had him and the stolen gold, if he stayed above ground.

There is no cover to hide such men in Assineboia, and Ben Sellick, though he had kept his eyes open, had seen no sign of a horse near the coulée. In his mind the agents were "as good as gaoled already."

CHAPTER VI.

MAN-HUNTING.

"BEN, don't look round and don't stop them, but move your feet so that I can get that rifle."

Ben Sellick had almost forgotten Noel's existence for the time, but he did as he was bid, and asked without turning his head—

"What is the good of the gun now?"

"Just this," Noel answered, putting his arm through the opening at the end of the coach, and withdrawing the weapon. "I am going to drop out as soon as we pass behind that last clump of cypress, and I want it. Did you notice anything about those three shots?"

"No, except that the bullets came too close to be pleasant."

"But the shots didn't come too close to have been fired by *one* Winchester."

"What do you mean?"

"Either that only one man fired, or that there was only one man to fire."

"You don't say! but no, one man dared not do it."

"I believe one man did; if not there will be somebody watching, and I shall have a pretty tough time of it. So long, Ben. I'd take short odds that I have the man and the gold waiting for you by the time you get back from East-end;" and with a quiet laugh Noel dropped out from behind, as they swung round the cypresses, as coolly and as nimbly as if he had been getting out of a bus in Piccadilly, and lay there until the sound of the horses' feet, still cantering, was almost lost in the rising wind.

Al through the scene described in the last chapter, Noel Johns had kept his head, and in spite of the growing darkness and the noisy wind, he had noticed a good many things which had escaped Ben Sellick's observation.

He had in the first place noticed the feigned voice, and the sudden change of tone, when disappointed rage revealed the real man for a moment; he had heard the orders given to the men behind the rifles

on the right and on the left, and he thought that there had been no answers given ; he had seen, too, another thing which happened as the road-agent turned quickly to look for the gun Ben said was covering him from the coach ; he had seen one of the rifle-barrels, disturbed probably by his sudden movement, tip forward, and then slowly slide out of its place, and rest point downwards on the ground in front of the screen ; and he had noted, too, that all the three shots fired were consecutive, not simultaneous. Noel Johns felt as sure that there was only one man behind the cypress screen as he ever was of anything, and he chuckled to himself as he thought of the excellent opening this adventure would make for him in his new career. The capture of a successful stage robber single-handed is not an everyday occurrence, but this was just what he thought he saw his way to achieving.

But for some time he lay still.

If he was wrong in his surmise ; if, after all, the man who held them up had confederates with him, it was probable that one of them had crept through the bush to watch the coach out of sight. In that case, as soon as he crawled out from his hiding-place, he

might be greeted with a bullet through the body. Like a sportsman preparing to crawl in to dangerous game, he tried his carbine. The pump of the little Winchester worked easily, and the magazine was full. To make sure, even at the risk of being heard, he ejected the cartridges. There were seven of them. Carefully he picked them up and replaced them, put one into the chamber, and then lying flat on his stomach crawled out from his cover and across the open to the edge of the coulée. It was nervous work and slow, but he reached the bushes at last and lay panting, but reassured. The worst of the stalk was over, and he was now almost absolutely sure that he was right. The dusk was coming on rapidly. Under the cypresses it was already dark. There was no sound of any kind. The beat of the horses' feet and the rattle of the stage had died away in the distance; except for the creaking and groaning of some dead tree in an occasional puff of wind, and that little shiver which sometimes runs through the boughs, all was absolutely still. Behind him lay the prairie, dim and vague, no sign of life upon it anywhere, and in front the coulée, full of dark trees and darker shadows. As long as the darkness

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was unbroken, it would be well with him. What he feared was that a little red flame would spit out from the darkness. If it did, he wondered whether he would live to see it. He remembered how, a long time ago, he had watched a friend stalking a buck. He remembered the long time he waited whilst his friend crawled in, and how he had seen the buck fall first, before it seemed to him, he saw the flash, and long before, he heard the report. Well, it was a merciful death anyway, and a man crawling on his stomach through the shadows would be a good deal harder to hit than a buck standing up in the open.

Gently parting the bushes in front of him, he crawled forward. In spite of his utmost care a dry leaf rustled here and there. Once a dry stick cracked. The whole wood seemed to listen, and the shadows to flit from bush to bush. The perspiration stood in great beads on his brow, though his breath froze hard on his moustache. But he went on, and, at last only a hundred yards separated him from that point on the road where the treasure-chest lay. The road of course would be lighter than the bush, but it would not be light enough to make it safe to shoot at a hundred yards, so he wormed his way

back again into cover, and crawled round until he felt certain that if the man was by the chest, he must be within fifty yards of him. For Noel was hunting his man as men hunt grizzlies, and expected to kill him over his prey. For a moment he lay and listened. Yes, there was some one there. In the stillness he could hear him breathing, and Noel thought that the beating of his own heart against his ribs would betray him. Then there came to him the sound of tearing paper, and the noise of it in the stillness made him start and tighten his grip on his rifle's barrel. But he could wait no longer. Inch by inch he raised his head, and his rifle came up with him inch by inch, until at last he looked down the barrel—at what? A single, lonely figure standing right out in the open by the mail-bag, absolutely unconscious, or careless of danger, with an open letter in his hand, which he seemed trying in vain to read. The treasure-chest lay where Ben had put it. No one seemed to have troubled to go near it.

It was a strange position. Noel had expected to find the man busy pocketing the treasure for which he had broken the law and risked his life;

and instead he found the chest untouched, and the man trying in the dim light to read some one else's letters. As he looked at him, there came again that uneasy consciousness of something in the man's figure which was familiar to him, but before he had time to think, just the edge of the rising moon crept above the trees, and in its white light the man turned and confronted him. There was nothing in that heavily bearded face, however, to strengthen the suspicion which the man's real voice and the outline of his figure had suggested.

Rising quickly Noel covered his man, and again that strange command broke the stillness of the cypresses—

“Hands up! If you stir you are a dead man!”

But the man made no attempt to stir. He didn't even raise his hands, but let them hang closely by his side, one of them still holding the letter. On the side of the road, ten paces from him, lay his rifle; the moonlight fell upon the screen, and showed plainly now the two fir-poles which in the half-light of an hour ago had imposed upon Ben Sellick. One of them had slipped from its place, and lay exposed in front of the ambushade.

Noel walked out into the open.

"You are my prisoner. If you attempt to bolt, I can't miss you," he said.

"My gun is there. I've no chance, so you must do as you please. Better shoot, and have done with it," was the answer.

This of course was clearly impossible. Had the man resisted, Noel would have shot him like a dog. It would have made matters much easier for Noel, and not very much worse for his captive. But you can't shoot a man in cold blood, with the quiet moon looking on, even if he tells you to.

Noel was at a loss. He had got his man, but he did not know what to do with him. However, he remembered that Farwell could not be more than six miles off at the most, and, in any case, they could not both of them stand there all night.

"Turn round and take the trail to Farwell," Noel commanded; "I shall follow, and if you turn round or leave the trail, I fire!"

Without a word the man deliberately folded up the letter he had been reading, put it in his pocket, and turning round moved off along the trail, his hands in his pockets, his head down, perfectly

indifferent, it seemed to his captor, as to where he went, or who followed him.

In this fashion the two left the coulée, and silently plodded on towards Farwell, whilst the wind, which had risen again with the rising moon, came in short, sharp puffs and little scurries, as if it was preparing itself for more serious work. The silence of this strange procession was intolerable to Noel, and before long he became conscious that his coat was covered with a fine, thick powder of snow, which grew and grew until he could feel it underfoot, and which soon so filled the air as to almost quench the moonlight, obliging him to come closer to his captive to keep him in sight. As he drew nearer, the man stopped and turned round. As quick as thought Noel raised his carbine, but the fellow, instead of flinching, looked quietly down the threatening barrel, and laughed in his face.

"No, no," he said; "I'm not on the fight. I told you I would go quietly, and I will; but it seems to me that you might oblige me with a pipe of tobacco. I've neither smoked nor eaten for a good many hours now. Stand where you are and throw it to me if you won't trust me any closer, though I don't see

why you should mind a struggle with a smaller man than yourself."

After all, he was right, and Noel as he measured him felt shamed by his prisoner's coolness, and acted foolishly in consequence.

"Come as close as you please," he answered; "I'll take my chance;" and drawing his pouch from his pocket, he offered it to him, looking curiously into his bearded sun-tanned face as he did so. The face he saw certainly was not one which he remembered, and yet there was a trick about it somewhere (it might have been about the fearless grey eyes) which reminded him in a curious indefinite fashion of some one he had seen before: some one whose features he had stored up in one of the pigeon-holes of his brain, but in a pigeon-hole to which for the moment he could not find his way.

Undoubtedly there was something about this road-agent out of keeping with his surroundings. In spite of his feigned voice and his occasional slang, there was no trace of the Canadian twang in his speech; and in spite of the rents in them, and the service they had seen, it was evident that the clothes he wore had not originally been of the

ordinary prairie cut and fashion. Even the pipe, which he was quietly filling from Noel's pouch, was, if the light could be relied upon, an English briar, as like one of Loewe's pipes which he had in his own pocket as two peas in a pod. The "old man" had given Noel his pipe the day of the railway accident on the E. and N. Railway. It was the last of a dozen, which the foolish old man had imported before he knew the virtues of a "corn cob."

As the road-agent handed him back his pouch, Noel took out his own pipe, and proceeded to fill it; the man's eyes rested on it as he did so.

"Our pipes are a good deal alike. They might be brothers, or cousins, mightn't they?" he asked chaffingly. "They are both of them a good deal the worse for wear, though."

"Yes, they are both English. I suppose we are like them in that."

The man made no answer, but turned to follow the trail again, stopping, however, after the first half-dozen paces to say—

"I suppose you know the trail to Farwell?"

"Yes, this is it," Noel answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, if this is it, that is all right, only this would be a bad night to be left out in. It is beginning to snow in earnest." And so saying he turned up the collar of his coat with a shiver and trudged on once more.

Perhaps it was only the monotony of the walk and the constant strain upon his vigilance which affected his judgment, or perhaps it was the ugly look of the night which made him unusually anxious to get under cover; but whatever the cause, Noel began to think that the last six miles between Cypress Coulée and Farwell were the longest ever measured, and when a second low black line in front, seen faintly in the snow and night, warned him that they had reached a second timbered coulée, he called to the man in front of him—

"Do you know this coulée?"

"Yes, I know it, but it's not on the way to Farwell."

"Not on the way to Farwell! Where is it, then?"

"Between Farwell and Battle Creek."

For the moment Noel thought that the man had wilfully misled him, but he banished the idea at once. If it had been his object to mislead him, why

should he expose his plot now? But he certainly did not remember another couloé between Cypress Coulée and Farwell. For a while he peered into the night, for some familiar landmark, but there are no landmarks, or very few, upon the prairie, even in the daytime. He listened, hoping to hear the sound of the policemen's horses' feet upon the snow, but a moment's reflection convinced him that it was too soon to expect them yet. He was fairly lost, and he knew it.

His prisoner's voice broke in upon his meditations.

"Well, are you satisfied that we are lost?" he asked, "or that you are, at any rate?"

"I certainly don't know this coulée: but it makes no difference, we can find some shelter here and wait for daylight," he replied stubbornly; "unless you like to try to find the way to Farwell for us, and I don't suppose you will do that."

"I'll try, if you tell me to. I'd rather spend the night there than here; but I'm not sure that I could find the way, and Farwell must be a long way from here, but I know of a police-shack close by, where we could get shelter if you chose to."

Again Noel hesitated. It looked very much as if

his prisoner was leading him into a trap ; but it was in any case a choice of evils, and he began to realize that he would find it almost impossible to keep this man with him through the dark hours of the night unless he stayed voluntarily, so that when he asked him again to make up his mind whether he would go or stay, Noel bade him curtly "go ahead," and followed him down into the timber. Ten minutes' floundering in the bush proved that the road-agent's local knowledge was reliable, as it brought them to one of those small one-roomed log cabins, which the police have put up here and there as rest houses for benighted members of the force, or other storm-stayed travellers.

"They've forgotten to leave a key, of course," grumbled the man, "but I suppose this will do as well," and raising his foot, he drove in the frail door with his heel, and entering, struck a match, by the light of which Noel could see a wide open fireplace, down the chimney of which the snow had already drifted freely, a rough table, and a few empty meat-tins, and other relics of the last tenants.

"There is a candle-stump here, if the rats haven't taken it out of the tin where I put it: they eat

everything," muttered the man, feeling about in the chinks of the cabin wall, and finally producing the end of a candle, which he lit, and placed on the table.

"They've laid the cloth for us," he added, pointing to the snow, with which the table was covered. "It only wants a little fire and some food to make things quite comfortable," and so saying, he went out again, and returned in a few minutes carrying a huge armful of shingles and planks torn from an outhouse.

"I didn't ask leave," he remarked as he came in, "but you must consider me a prisoner on parole for to-night."

Noel had hardly noticed how both of them had unconsciously dropped their relative positions as captor and captive, but he started more at the man's voice than at his words. For the second time he had forgotten his disguise, and, but for the utterly inconsistent surroundings, Noel could hardly have helped recognizing his voice. But the man saw his mistake as soon as he had made it, and relapsed at once into silence, or spoke, when obliged to, in the hoarse tone he had at first adopted.

"You are a queer beggar for a road-agent," Noel answered; "but I accept the position: only remember, I too shall keep my word. My life is nearly as much at your mercy as your life is at mine. Still, if you were to kill me, the boys would catch you sooner or later, and then——"

"Then I should swing for it. Yes, I know, and I would almost as soon swing as not. However, you can go to sleep in peace if you want to. I shall be here when you wake," and so saying, he raked together a few odds and ends of hay, which were on the floor, and made room upon them for Noel and himself.

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

FOR an hour perhaps those two lay smoking in the firelight without speaking even a word, and only shifting now and then to escape the bitter wind which howled under the door, or the acrid wood smoke which was driven down the chimney, making their eyes shut and water with pain. The hay upon which they lay was damp, and grew every minute damper as the heat of their bodies, or of the little fire, thawed the snow which had drifted amongst it, so that from time to time they had to rise and dry themselves before the burning logs.

"Pretty miserable for Christmas Eve," at last remarked the road-agent.

"Christmas Eve!" ejaculated Noel. "This isn't Christmas Eve, is it?"

"So the almanac says. At least, it is the 24th

of December. I don't know whether there are any Christmas Eves in this cursed country."

"Then you *are* an old countryman, like myself?"

"Yes, I'm an old countryman, but not like yourself. You are for the law. I'm against it."

"But why? Surely you might do better than this?"

"Perhaps; it wouldn't seem difficult; but have you done any better by abiding by the law, than I by breaking it? A man must either rob or be robbed. I've tried both, and neither game seems to pay."

Noel was silent; he found it difficult to answer this man's question. He knew of one man at least who had robbed, and of another who had been robbed; and now, whilst one lay half-freezing in that police-shack, the other was probably dispensing lavish hospitality in his own house in Victoria—to men who knew him, and knew what a real estate-agent is, and forgave him for his success and his good wine; and to others who did not know, and who would in consequence pay for their stupid ignorance.

These latter, no doubt birds of passage, would in their hearts vote Snape "a bit of a cad," but a

liberal good fellow for a colonist, never guessing that he and such as he are the men who mar, not make, colonies; and that though things are dear in British Columbia, Mr. Snape would, when he "totted up" his account for that Christmas Eve entertainment before going to bed, find the balance very much upon his side. How? you ask. Merely because under the influence of his genial smile, and liberal libations of his undoubted '47 port, Brown had taken several shares in his company for the reclamation of the Whitwater Morass, and Smith had agreed to buy that excellent corner on George Street at fifty per cent. more than it was worth, and at least thirty-five per cent. more than Snape meant to pay to its owner.

Well, it was no use thinking of these things. He had been taught one set of rules, Snape another; and, after all, there were worse places than the police-shack. He could hear a coyote outside, and he pitied the wretched little vagrant. That anything having in it the breath of life could survive on such a night seemed impossible, for the drifting snow seemed to be burying everything, and, in spite of their efforts, was drifting so thickly down the wide open chimney as to extinguish the fire. When the

fire went out, hope seemed to go with it. They could not even sit smoking any longer, drawing fancy pictures in the glowing embers. The quiet of the grave settled on the hut, and bit by bit the dampness which the heat had created disappeared, and everything grew hard and crisp again to the touch. Even the legs of the men's trousers, which had been soaked through with melted snow, stiffened and hardened until they cracked when they moved, and their breath froze upon their moustaches. The door which Noel tried to open was snow-blocked, and where he could feel that there should have been a space to see through, he could see nothing. Outside there was a really solid darkness, which blinded the stars, and kept falling, falling with a soft silent insistence. Shutting the door again, he groped his way back to his corner, reached for his rifle and laid it by his side. For a moment it occurred to him that his captive might have drawn his cartridges in the dark, and opening the breech as noiselessly as he could, he felt for the cartridge which should be in the magazine, and found it there. Comparatively noiseless as his action had been, the other heard it, and laughed a low, harsh laugh.

"It is not worth it, mate," the voice said. "Why should I try to escape, or you either? Maybe, it would be better for you if I were to kill you, if I could. Better for you, I mean. If you're so keen to live, better come and lie close here and keep your blood warm a bit longer. I shan't touch the rifle."

"It's not as bad as that," answered Noel; "but company is better for both of us, I grant you," and so saying he laid down the rifle, and the two made the most of the wisp of hay on the floor, and crept close to one another and lay there, listening to the scurrying feet of live things on the table and round the hut looking for crumbs, and looking in vain. For hours it seemed to Noel that he lay there slowly stiffening with cold, then sleep came, and he passed at once from winter prairies of Assineboia to the summer meadows of the Thames. He was in the old hall again at Kingdon, giving Pussy Verulam that farewell kiss, and hearing the old man's good wishes for his voyage; or he was with his child love in the woods at home by the keeper's cottage, or sculling her on the long sunny reaches of the Thames, or listening to her sweet voice in the hospital in Victoria. Suddenly the dreams vanished,

and he woke. A light, bright by comparison with the gloom around it, had fallen across his eyelids and awoke him. Without stirring he looked and saw his companion sitting up beside him, the end of the candle which he had saved lighted again, reading a letter. From end to end he seemed to read it, and then let it fall with a groan which sounded like the bursting of a strong heart. "My God, Pussy, if I had only known!" the man muttered, and his hand clenched and his whole figure seemed to writhe with pain, while the voice was no longer the feigned voice which Noel had heard until then, so that when he turned his face towards his captor, the red beard gone and all disguise laid aside, the two looked into each other's faces and understood why in the jaws of death both were thinking of the same sweet English girl.

"Trevor, my God! is it you?" gasped Noel.

"Yes, I'm Trevor Johns, Noel, or was Trevor Johns until yesterday. To-morrow, I suppose, I shall be the road-agent who held up the Pinto coach, and was found frozen stiff alongside his captor, Noel Johns, the policeman," and Trevor laughed bitterly.

"I wish there was no more real danger than that,"

replied Noel. "But why in Heaven's name did you hold up the coach? You wouldn't have robbed it?"

"Wouldn't have robbed it! wouldn't I? Whose money was it that was in that chest, mine or theirs? Honesty is the best policy some folks say, and I dare say it may be, but I'd like to get an accurate definition of honesty. I only know one law, that I have seen justified in my experience."

"And that?"

"The devil takes care of his own. But, there, cousin, the game is played now, and can't be helped. Perhaps we shall get a second innings somewhere, and know the rules better. Let us blow out the candle, and I'll tell you a story as we used to when Ruth thought we had gone to sleep. Shall we move this rifle now? It is a bit in the way, and I don't suppose you want it now, do you?"

For answer Noel took the carbine, and tossed it roughly across the floor, where it fell softly enough amongst the drifted snow.

"You know I stayed behind when Pussy and the old man went home?" Trevor asked.

"Yes, with those Gilchrists," replied Noel, bitterly.

"And was very properly punished for my folly. That girl played with me like a cat with a mouse. I felt ashamed of myself all the time, because I thought she was fond of me, and she left for Tacoma with a dry-goods' man, in an avalanche of flowers, the day after her father got me into his cursed company."

Trevor waited for some comment from his cousin, but getting none, went on—

"Served me deuced well right, I suppose you think, and I suppose it did; but I paid pretty dearly for a flirtation in which the girl made all the running. You heard what it cost me?"

"Yes. Everything."

"Everything; and you still wonder that I meant to get enough back to take me out of this cursed country?"

"But you did not touch the gold, Trevor?"

"No; but I would have done, if I could have opened the chest. I found these first," and he held up two letters.

"What interest could they have for you?" asked Noel.

"You shall read them and see. They were sent

to me when Trevor Johns was principal owner of the Pinto Mine, and were on their way back marked, 'Not known there.' "

Noel took the proffered letters, and striking a match, looked round for the candle-end which he had laid aside a few minutes earlier. But starvation sharpens the wits and gives courage to the feeble, and there were other starving things in the police-shack besides the two men that night. The tireless feet, which they had heard pattering round in the earlier hours of darkness, had passed by them whilst they talked, and some hungry, bright-eyed beast had seized and carried off the neglected candle-end.

"Gone, by Jove!" muttered Trevor. "It's a great country. I wonder if they will steal our bones when we are dead; they will if they can make anything of them."

"Find some dry wood if you can," suggested Noel, "and if you have any matches, let me have them. We must 'fire up' again."

Trevor did as he was bid, and by dint of much coaxing the two made a flame big enough to spell out the two letters by.

The first of these was from Trevor's man of

business, and was dated, "Kingdon, Gloucestershire, November 3rd." It had crossed some three thousand miles of sea, and nearly as many miles of land, since it left the private room of Mr. Gaines, senior partner in the firm of Gaines and Co. Possibly when that snug and highly respectable person wrote it in his comfortable armchair, some slight twinge of envy touched him; envy, not altogether unreasonable, of the lucky correspondent, still under thirty, into whose pockets wealth flowed unsought, unworked for.

Well, at any rate, there would be very considerable pickings for Gaines and Co. in the administration of Mr. Trevor Johns' estate, but the senior partner deeply regretted that "that silly young idiot" (a synonym for "our respected client") should have acquired a taste for mining, and mining too in America! Mr. Gaines was a gentleman of insular prejudices, and hated America and Americans almost as much as Americans hate the English. However, marriage he supposed would cure this folly; and there, again, had ever man such luck? This boy was engaged to the beautiful Miss Verulam, the pride of the whole country. Lucky dog! He could marry

a beautiful woman: some hard-working men he knew of had to marry rich women—and the thought made him strike his bell angrily, and rate a meek clerk who answered it for an imaginary fault which the poor devil was too polite to deny.

But Fortune has a queer way of distributing her gifts. If Mr. Gaines could by any possibility have seen the reading of his letter, he might have come to the conclusion that we all get about a fair deal after all.

“MY DEAR SIR” (he wrote),

“It is my painful duty to announce the death of our late respected client, your uncle, Mr. Hughes, of the Marsh, who died somewhat unexpectedly last week. As you know, Mr. Hughes, in addition to being well-stricken in years, had been ailing slightly for some months, but his sudden death from aneurism of the heart was none the less a severe shock to all who had had the pleasure of knowing him. Although the pernicious system of free trade has done much to injure the landed interest of late, Mr. Hughes died a very rich man, and though he has seen fit to devise the

Marsh estate to your cousin, Mr. Noel Johns, he has left the residue of his property, real and personal, to you. I have, therefore, my dear sir, much pleasure in congratulating you on your succession to the Trefnant property, and on the addition of something like £150,000 to your personal property.

"Should you elect to leave the management of the property in our hands, we shall respect the trust, and treat the property committed to our care with that careful consideration which, we venture to believe, helped not a little to put it upon its present substantial basis. Awaiting your commands, I am, my dear sir,

"Yours obediently,

"L. GAINES."

For a moment Noel looked incredulously at the paper in his hand, and then dashing it down he cried—

"Great Scott, what luck! Why, Trevor, our troubles are over."

"Yours are, if you can get out of this storm and find your way to the line," his cousin answered sadly; "but there is no chance for me, that I can see."

"Why not, man? You've lost one estate, but you have got another; and as for this storm, there never was a blizzard in the nor'-west that I wouldn't worry through, somehow, if Trefnant was waiting for me on the other side; and this is no blizzard yet."

"How about that little incident of the stage-coach?"

Noel's face changed in a moment. With his mind fixed on home, and the good luck which had come to his cousin and himself, he had, for the moment, forgotten the real position of affairs.

"You see," Trevor went on, "you are bound in honour to give me up, and if you do, I shall never see England again until it is too late. Poor little Pussy!" and the strong man groaned as if his heart would break.

"I'm not in the police, though I don't know whether that makes much difference," muttered Noel, speaking to himself rather than to his cousin.

"None. Your duty is plain. If we escape the storm, I must stay here, but you can go home, old chap. It's no fault of yours."

"Go home? and I suppose in time everything

would come to me, and Noel Johns would do extremely well, *at his cousin's expense*; an honourable rôle you propose for me to play, cousin."

"Forgive me, Noel. I know you would help me if you could," said Trevor. "But what can you do? Fate has been too strong for us, and I can see no way out."

Noel made no answer. He had made up his mind that Trevor owed the law nothing, or but very little, and for himself he was not bound to it by any pledge or pay. At any rate, he was for the time like crusty Tommy Atkins, the alimony man, "agin the law."

"Am I to read Pussy's letter?" he asked, after a pause.

"Yes, read it, and remember, Noel, that if you get home without me, you must lie to her for her own sake. She must never know of this miserable affair, if we can help it. You'll see she thought of you, though she does not seem to have heard of your good fortune."

Noel took the delicate paper in his hands, and bending over the embers, felt half ashamed as he looked into the tender heart laid bare before him.

"MY DEAR OLD BOY" (he read),

"Are you not utterly ashamed of yourself for staying away so long? Are big-horn sheep and gold mines really the only things which are detaining you? Mind, Trevor, the best of us are jealous, sometimes, and even if I were heart-sick with waiting for you, I should get over it, or hide it, if you kept away much longer.

"Seriously, the 'old man' says you ought to lose no time in coming home now, as since your uncle's death (of course, you heard of that), there are so many things for you to attend to here.

"It is perfectly wicked, I think, to go on grubbing for more money now, in those horrid American mines. You will have more than you can spend in your own country, so come back at once, and if you can, dear, bring back that poor boy of ours with you. The old man is always thinking of him, and it seems to me too hard that he should be left out in the cold, whilst all the rest of us here at Kingdon are to be so happy. We might make Noel our agent, when we are married. He is too proud to take any money which he did not earn, even from us. I wonder why old Mr. Hughes left him nothing. He

was his uncle as much as he was yours, but poor Noel never had any luck. We must try to make it up to him, you and I. But, there, come back, and come soon, and we will make the old home home again. I want to see the old man laugh as he used to do; I want to hear the house noisy again; I don't mind even if you leave your guns about, or if those muddy spaniels do come into the drawing-room; I'll forgive anything except delay. I want your arm round my waist, Trevor, to give me courage, for I think it's all gone with my heart, dear, and I want you to come at once, and forget that I ever wrote such a foolish letter, or I shall repent when I really am,

"Your little wife,
"PUSSY."

When Noel handed the letter back to his cousin, there were tears in his eyes which the wood smoke had not caused, and a choking sensation in his throat which for a time prevented speech.

When he found his voice at last, he laid his hand on Trevor's arm, and said, with a queer, false laugh, which was very like a sob—

"Thank you, old man. I don't think I ought to have read it, but it will be quite easy now to hand you over to the chain-gang—quite easy; and then I think I'll go home and see your little wife Pussy."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE HEART OF THE STORM.

THE storm which Ben Sellick and the bands of homing cattle had predicted had come at last. It had hung about, as such storms will, for a couple of days, but now it had put out the stars, and outside the police-shack the darkness moved and fell, growing thicker and thicker every moment, until even the prairie wind seemed paralyzed by the weight of the noiseless flakes. Noel Johns, who had been peering through the door into the dark, groped his way back again to the wisp of damp hay, and lay down beside his cousin.

"Trevor," he said, "there is one chance for us. It is a poor one, but if this snowfall stops, we must try it."

"Better do your duty, and let me take my chance," replied the other.

"We won't argue that question. I have made up my mind about my duty. I am not a servant of the law, and I don't think either justice or honour compels me to give you up. In any case, I don't mean to," he added firmly.

"You always were a fool, cousin," said Trevor, "but a brave and honest one. Well, if you will have it so, what is this chance?"

"This snowstorm. It will stop the pursuit for one thing, and Ben Sellick will probably conclude that we have been lost in it."

"In which conclusion he will probably be right."

"Possibly; but if you will only rouse yourself, and make a fight for it, he *may* be wrong. Whilst they think we are stiffening under the snow, we might be plodding through it to the line."

"The boundary line? You are mad; that must be a hundred miles from here."

"No; the Canadian Pacific. If we reach that we may be able to board a train going East, and show these fellows a clean pair of heels after all. It is simply a question of endurance. Do you think you could walk another thirty miles through the snow without food?"

"No, I'm pretty sure I couldn't; but *you* might, and I would rather die in the open than either here or in prison."

Noel almost groaned. He knew the terrible difficulty of the task before them, and realized that the man whose life he wanted to save had lost heart already, and was broken down with hunger, fatigue, and misery. How could he hope to drag such a man through thirty miles of snow-drifts?

"Well, we cannot start yet, so we may as well lie down and try to sleep. We shall want all our strength for to-morrow," he said, and after piling on the last of the wood, he lay down by his cousin, and made believe to sleep, whilst Trevor, utterly exhausted, dropped off into a doze. Meanwhile, in the growing cold, Noel Johns fought the great battle of his life—the battle between a pure love and self-interest. His mind had never been clearer than it was that night. He saw all the possible loss or gain; he realized all the risk; recognized that for him there could be no reward, and made up his mind to do his duty. But it was very hard. He was younger than Trevor, and had hitherto had no share, or only a small one, in the

good things of life, and now for the first time a prospect of an almost perfect life opened before him. As the Squire of the Marsh he would have almost everything he coveted. He knew every acre of the estate, every room in that dear old Manor House, almost every fence which a horse would have to clear in his way across the farms. He could absolutely *see*, as he lay there with his eyes shut, the gorse which was such a sure find for a fox, or the pool below the larch wood, where the wild ducks bred, and to which the teal came in the winter evenings; or the long bank above the house, where you were always sure on an autumn evening of half a dozen shots at crossing rabbits. Yes, he knew it all, and knew that after his sojourn in the West he would appreciate it as he could never have appreciated it before. If he chose to hold his prisoner in the shack for another day, the police would, he felt sure, find them, and after a little more hardship he, Noel Johns, would be free to go home and be happy. And as for Trevor? Well, Trevor had made a fool of himself, and must pay for his own folly. He had won the only thing Noel cared for, Pussy Verulam's love, and trifled with it for the sake of a vulgar,

yellow-headed hussy, whose manners would not have qualified her for a place as housemaid at Kingdon. Yes, that was all very true, but in spite of all that, Pussy loved Trevor, and unless he would break her heart he must save her lover for her.

Here a voice whispered in his ear, "Need Pussy ever know? Wouldn't time console her? And then——"

He would listen no further. His cheeks burned even in the dark and cold of that miserable hut, as he thought of Noel Johns, a rich man grown richer by his cousin's disappearance or death, shirking the question in those grey eyes he loved so well—"Where is Abel, thy brother?"

"Great Scott!" he muttered to himself, "what am I thinking of? Am I going to set my happiness before hers?" and as he said so, he sprang to his feet, brushed away the last shred of doubt, of feeble self-pity and of human selfishness, and braced himself for the last struggle against Fate.

"Rouse up, Trevor. The snow has stopped, and it's light enough to see," he cried, and Trevor sat stiffly up and shivered until his teeth chattered.

"Do you know the way, Noel?"

"No, there is no *way* to know ; but the line is a long one, and if we go due north from here we must cut it. Are you ready ?"

"I suppose so ; there is no breakfast to wait for," replied Trevor, and the two pushed through the weight of snow which lay against the door, climbed out of the coulée and set their faces resolutely towards the north.

As they reached the edge of the coulée dawn came, and they saw the pale light creep over the long, white, treeless waste. At first the day was very still. The heavy snowfall had stopped, and towards ten o'clock the sun even showed himself. He looked cheerful, but there was no warmth to be got from him ; still that mattered little, for after a time the exercise of plodding through snow a foot deep on the flat, waist deep sometimes in the coulées, will warm a man in any climate. For hours the two cousins kept on. The work was terrible, but the prize was freedom, and both men had been trained from childhood in all manner of athletics to make every muscle do its utmost.

It was nearly midday when the two stood resting for a moment.

"What has become of the sun again, Noel?" asked Trevor.

"I suppose that blot represents him up there. I wish we had a compass."

"Why?"

"Because I am afraid those are more snow-clouds," he answered, pointing to the heavy, yellowish banks of cloud in which the sun seemed lost, "and if it begins to snow again, we shall only have the wind to steer by. If that shifts, God only knows what will become of us."

"Never mind, shove on, old fellow," replied Trevor, "the snow hasn't begun yet; but, I say, are those antelope or wolves?" and he pointed towards the skyline behind them.

"Neither, Trevor," replied Noel, after a pause. "They are the Mounted Police."

"Then the game is up, thank God for it! I am utterly sick of this anyway," and he was just walking out of the coulée in which they had been resting when Noel caught him by the arm and held him back.

"Don't be a cur. Isn't Pussy worth fighting for?" he hissed savagely into his ear. "Lie down here. I don't believe they have seen us yet."

"But they must find our tracks, and then what chance have we?"

"That," replied Noel, and pointed to where the sun had been and where now there was nothing but a dull, yellowish blot amidst a mass of seething grey clouds, which drifted hither and thither, or were torn into rags and sent spinning in wreaths and streamers across the sky. Meanwhile the wind was rising with a rapidity which Trevor had never seen equalled.

"The blizzard will save us from them, at any rate," muttered Noel. "Take hold of my hand, Trevor. If we ever part in this, we shall never meet again. Look at it coming."

In the dull light which still remained to them they could see the snow, which an hour before had been a quiet carpet under their feet, rising and flowing towards them. For nearly three feet from the ground these snow-waves rose, and swept after them, growing higher and higher as the wind worked itself up into wilder fury. Between them and their pursuers a curtain had been spread, and taking advantage of it, and guided by the wind, Noel set his teeth, and gripping his cousin's hand, floundered stubbornly onward. Now and again there would

come a rift in the clouds, and an interval of dim light. In one of these Trevor tried to wrap an overcoat he wore more tightly round his head and shoulders, the wind seeming to go through his cap and bore into his brain with a gimlet of ice. But the wind got under the coat and wrenched it from him. For a moment it was above his head, a dark spot in the gloom; the next it vanished. In another place, as they plunged up to their thighs in a snow-bank, the whole bank seemed to explode beneath them; there was a whirring of strong wings, and then the wind knocked the great birds down again, and the cousins saw them skulking along in front, their necks craned out, their heads on one side, and their tails blown almost over their heads.

"They had holed up in that bank," said Noel, looking at the prairie-chicken as he spoke. "I expect it is our only chance now."

"No; better keep going, Noel. If I stopped now I could never go on again," replied Trevor, and the two plodded on again towards the north.

"Shouldn't we pass the line without seeing it?" asked Trevor. "Surely it must be buried several feet deep in snow by now."

"The rails may be buried, but the telegraph poles will show us where we are."

"Well, if there is a line in the country, we must strike it soon. We have been going ten hours."

Noel made no answer. Even if his cousin's calculation of time was accurate, it did not follow that they had travelled anything like thirty miles. Men don't make three miles an hour in the snow, even if they keep in the right direction all the time, and he was not sure that they had done that. But he saw that Trevor could not go much further. Those who have tried it, know how hard it is for tired men to keep up the mechanical action of their legs when every step is an effort, when all the spring has gone from the stride, when the muscles are weary, and there is no goal in sight. Milestones or any landmarks on a journey help a tired man. To reach the milestone costs an effort, but the effort brings its reward. When the stone comes in sight it is a palpable witness that something has been achieved, a sure promise that there is only so much more to be done. But without the milestones it is weary work, and in the dim sea of snow which was beneath, above, and around the cousins, they seemed,

in spite of their efforts, to make no way, to gain nothing. And the more Trevor staggered in his stride, the more the storm grew, the more the darkness deepened, and the wilder the wind shrieked. It was by sheer force alone now that Noel managed to drag his companion out of the deeper drifts. If Noel would have let him, he would have sunk long ago, and been content to lie and wait for death. A longing to sleep had crept over him, the darkness tempted him, the wind was a lullaby to him, the very monotony of his own ceaseless stride induced sleep.

"Let me be, Noel; let me sleep," he muttered, as Noel dragged him along, his eyes closing involuntarily as he walked, and at last even the younger man's strength gave out, and he stood there alone, looking out with white face and moving lips into the hurrying darkness around him. Trevor was at his feet unconscious; there was no light, no hope, no landmark, and his prayer went up, so it seemed to him, unheard, whilst without a sound the flow of the drifting flakes swept over them, resting on their heads and shoulders, piling up in drifts about their knees, settling down on them, creeping over

them. It was silent work, but swift. In a little while Noel, too, must succumb, and when the storm ceased, and the sun shone again, the only trace of them and their troubles would be two long swellings on the blinding, white winter carpet of the prairie.

He felt that he had fought his last round with Fate, and lost; and now he stood waiting as the dumb beasts wait for death, careless of his surroundings, his mind far away in the dear old home. Like a man in a dream he saw the home-faces beyond the grey gloom of the prairie, heard the home-voices above the wail of the winter wind, and he was conscious that it was Christmas, but Christmas in Kingdon-by-the-Thames, not Christmas on the prairies of Assineboia. The church-bells were throbbing in the frosty air, and there was light and music and an atmosphere of home. What was this that they were singing, too? He could not catch the words, but the air seemed familiar to him, and surely the refrain was "Noel! Noel!"

He did not understand it, but the repetition of the words struck him, amused him, and then fascinated him. Then the voice changed; it was a singing voice no longer, though the refrain was the

same, even that "Noel! Noel!" but the voice shrilled in the distance, begged, entreated, pleaded with him, until the whole universe seemed to throb with its wild prayer. He tried to close his ears to it. Sleep was too deep, too sweet to be broken, for any piteous cry from a half-forgotten world. But the cry was still with him—it would not cease. It pursued him, it maddened him, it made his heart beat again, and then at last he knew the voice, and understood what it wanted of him, and, rousing himself in the very shadow of death, sprang to his feet and answered it—"Pussy!"

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE CREES' DEAD-TENT.

THEY say that men who succumb to cold and fall asleep in the snow never wake again by natural means. That may be. It follows, then, that the means by which Noel Johns was aroused from the snowdrift were unnatural. That, too, is possible. We know so little about all the great things of life, that it is impossible for us to decide ; and as most men take very little interest in anything except the money-market, and their own balance at the bank, these questions if natural or supernatural are not worth considering. All that matters to us is, that at that cry of "Noel ! Noel !" he woke as men wake who have a great and imminent danger to face—woke with every sense on the alert, every muscle strung. As he gazed out into the black heart of the storm, the curtain of falling flakes parted for

a moment, and through the rift he saw, vague and monstrous, a tall conical tent.

Had Noel Johns not been standing on that narrow border between life and death, he might have shrunk back in fear, he might have doubted the voice, he might have preferred death in the snow to such a haven from the storm, for the Cree's teepee, seen through the whirling drifts, now black and close at hand, now fading away and melting into the distance, looked sufficiently weird and fantastic.

But Noel Johns stopped neither to wonder nor to doubt. He knew the voice which had called him back, and bending over his cousin, he swept the snow from him, gathered him up in his arms (full now of a new strength), and staggered with him to the teepee.

"He sleeps soundly," he muttered, as Trevor's head swung heavily over his shoulder; "but he can't be dead, or she would not have called me. These fellows seem to sleep as soundly," he added, shaking the skin covering of the teepee until the whole fabric rocked under his hands. But in spite of his violence no one either woke or stirred within. The teepee seemed to be deserted. No smoke curled from its

peak; there was no sound of life within, and yet as Noel groped about in the snow for the entrance his hands rested on a pair of snow-shoes, and a dog-sledge.

"Queer, that they should have left these," he muttered. "Hallo there!" But only the tent groaning in the wind answered him; and even when, having found the entrance, he stepped inside, into a darkness deeper than the darkness of the storm, and cried the Indian salutation, "Clahowya!" only the storm shrieked back, "Clahowya!" as it drove the snow-waves before it. Noel shuddered as he stood alone in the intense darkness. It seemed that the winds made mock of his loneliness.

But here, at any rate, there was shelter from the storm; and in ministering to Trevor he soon forgot himself and his surroundings. Trevor was very fast asleep, and, in spite of his cousin's efforts, he would not wake. Noel chafed his hands and his feet; he shook him, until his poor head seemed about to roll off his shoulders; he beat him, until his heart bled for him. But he would not wake. "My God, I shall lose him after all!" he groaned. "If only I had a fire!" And then, strange as it may seem, he first thought of

striking a match and inspecting the interior in which he found himself. Until that moment he had had no thought for anything except the waking of Trevor.

His pockets were full of drifted snow, but his body was not warm enough to make it melt; and even if it had melted, it would have done no harm, for his matches were safe in that best-of-all match-boxes, an empty brass cartridge case, with a cork in the end of it.

Drawing this out, and taking a bunch of wooden matches from it, he struck one of them, and in a moment a pale blue flame was struggling for life between the palms of his hands. Gradually the wood caught, and the light leaped out through his fingers and went prying into the dark corners of the tent. It found there wood chopped and piled ready for burning, cooking utensils standing ready for use, all the requisites of a redskin cuisine round the hearth, and then the light stole on towards a shadow blacker than the rest, but as it reached this the little flame went out. The mystery of that end of the tent was still unsolved, nor did Noel trouble to solve it. It was enough for him that there was wood

piled by the hearth, and that heat meant life to Trevor. In the dark he dragged his cousin alongside the hearth, then, in the dark still—for matches are too precious to men situated as they were to be wasted—he helped himself to wood from the Indian's store, cut long kindlings with his hunting-knife, laid the fire, and then lit it. The long slivers of cotton-wood caught, the flames ran up them, quivered for a moment as if afraid of the overwhelming darkness, and then went out, all except one red spark, which glowed and glowed as Noel fanned it with his breath, until slowly it made good its hold, and the loud crackling of wood sounded like words of comfort in that dreary place. The cotton-wood is an excellent friend to the men who dwell on the prairies. Its green fluttering leaves make a pleasant asylum for the birds by the rare streams in the spring-time, its graceful shape is an ornament to the cruelly monotonous expanse of the prairie, the gold of its autumn foliage lends a beauty to the dying year, and in winter its dry logs seem to be the only things which keep in them any of the warmth and merriment of more favoured climes.

Noel Johns blessed the cotton-wood, as the sparks

flew upwards and the flames danced merrily on the hearth, but he had no time even to warm himself. His whole time was taken up with the attempt to restore his cousin to life, and the pain of it. And at last his efforts were rewarded; but Trevor was wiser than his cousin, and instead of thanking him for bringing him back to life and life's misery, only cursed him for the pain he had brought him back to. But pain passes, and Noel took little heed of his curses. He was alive, and might still be saved, and that to Noel was the only important thing, so he wrapped him in his own coat and sat down himself by the fire, to roast one side of him whilst the other froze. For some minutes he sat there on his heels, wondering who owned the tent, and why the owners had left it. If they had not meant to come back, surely they would not have left the store of wood and all the camp outfit which lay around. Were they lost in the blizzard? he wondered; but no, that could never be. White men lose their way, and because they are ignorant of the signs in the sky are caught in blizzards and perish; but not Indians. And this was undoubtedly a red man's home. He looked up and peered into the dark corners,

but he could distinguish nothing clearly by the dim light of the smouldering logs, so he stirred them and added fresh fuel, and as the fire blazed up he looked again, and, brave man though he was, his blood curdled, his flesh froze, and his hair rose on his scalp at the horror of the thing he saw.

No wonder the little light of the match had seemed to shrink from that patch of gloom; no wonder the wind howled and wailed so eerily; no wonder if the chill of the grave rested upon that tent, *for it was a grave*, and there in the shadow sat the dead whose uninvited guests they were.

Behind them all the time, silent and motionless, had been the figure of one whose head was bowed down, whose hands were clasped about his knees. Over his head a blanket was wrapped, cowl fashion, so that his face and most of his figure were hidden from view. Only just enough of outline could be seen through the folds of the blanket to show that the figure was that of a human being—a human being who neither spoke nor stirred.

For a moment Noel thought that the blanket was lifted from beneath; but it was only the wind which moved it. The hands seemed about to unclench;

but it was only the play of the firelight upon their long, thin fingers. The man slept, and would never wake again. He could see now, as the light played more boldly about it, how the body had been propped up in a grim semblance of life, when it should have been at rest as other men are, when the days of waiting and working are over. The tent in which they were was a Cree dead-tent. That was why no smoke curled from its peak; that was why the wind sobbed round it in such ceaseless moanings. The sledges outside had been left for the dead to journey on; the firewood by the cold hearth was for the dead's use; the weapons for it to hunt with, and fight with in another world; the tent, too, so the Crees believed, would, when the prairie winds had rent it, and the winter snows rotted it, vanish into earth, and be pitched again on some happier hunting-grounds, those hunting-grounds to which the spring flowers go, and whither the great bands of buffalo have betaken themselves for safety from the white man's Winchester.

As Noel sat fascinated by the silent form opposite to him, he began to wonder what his history might be. Who killed him? Who left him there? There

were no Crees that he knew of much nearer than Battle Creek. Was it possible that this was one of them; and that, after all, he and Trevor had passed by Farwell, and were now not far from Stobart's station? It seemed likely enough; and then, as if some one had repeated them in his ear, he heard Stobart's words, "Yes; they've got small-pox again: the old chief, Tintinamous, died of it last week."

He started, and turned to see who had spoken; but there was no one else in the tent. Trevor was sleeping quietly, and that other never moved. So, then, this was the end of it. They had fled from the law to the blizzard, and escaped from the blizzard to take refuge in this pest-house. The toils of death were all round them, and there seemed no way of escape. It was too late even to try. They had breathed the tainted air, they had touched the dead man's things, and the night and storm held them prisoners, whether they would or not. Had he been alone, Noel would have taken his chance in the open; as it was, he sat sullenly there, facing the dead and waiting for morning, whilst the cold grew and grew until the very tent-poles cracked with the

intensity of it. The ordinary Englishman does not know what cold is. "Forty degrees below zero" means nothing to him. It is represented by certain figures, and that is all. But forty degrees below zero on paper, and forty degrees below zero upon the plains, are two widely different things.

Even a roaring camp-fire, the logs of which are the boles of forest trees, does not seem to materially help against such cold as that; and Noel began to find that, if the dead man's stock of wood was to last until morning, he would have to reduce his fire to such a size as might perhaps suffice to boil a billy over. To warm Trevor, Noel had stripped himself of his coat, and crept almost into the fire to keep himself alive; but now, as the night waned, and the fire grew less and less, he began to freeze. And yet in the tent there were blankets enough for half a dozen men. The Crees, when they left their chief, had not done things by halves. The rifle they had left him was worth as much as a month's hunting would produce; the axe and the sledges were of the best; the billy and frying-pan had never been used; and by his side was a pile of Hudson Bay blankets, worth perhaps thirty

or forty dollars. Noel had had his eye on them for half an hour or more, but the dead sat guarding them, and that hideous disease which all men dread probably lurked in their folds. Only Chinamen seem to treat small-pox with indifference. Indians dread it, and die by tribes from its ravages, but take no precautions against it. They are fatalists, and when it comes, huddle together like sheep, drop in their tracks, die on the warpath, and let their dead lie where they drop. They would never hesitate to share a blanket in which a man had died. Why should he hesitate to use these blankets left with their dead? Noel felt he must risk it. There was no other way. The last little log of wood was on the fire; and though he had almost ceased to feel the cold, he knew that that was but a proof of the power it had gained over him. He was almost too stiff to move, and his heart beat slower and slower. That fatal torpor was creeping over him again; and if he yielded to that, good-bye to Trevor's chance of escape. For a few more minutes he sat glaring at the silent watcher opposite him: it seemed as if they two were playing some fearful game of chance; and then he rose, and walking

steadily across the floor in the last flicker of his dying fire, took the blankets from the heap. He had done much for love's sake; for love's sake he would risk even this. As the last spark died out on the hearth, he heard Trevor wake and groan in the darkness; but he took no notice of him. Rolled in the dead man's blankets, he lay still, and at last he slept. Without light Trevor would not be likely to find that fatal pile, and even if he did, Noel could not help it. Nature had given way at last. What with anxiety, weariness, and hunger, the strong man could resist no longer. As soon as the least degree of warmth returned to his body, Noel slept. He had earned his sleep.

CHAPTER X.

THE NOTE OF A HUNTING HOUND.

"DROP them, you fool! drop them!

As he spoke Noel Johns sprang to his feet, and, catching his cousin by the arm, wrenched from him the blankets he had taken from the dead Cree's pile.

Feeble as he was, and taken by surprise, Trevor let them go, and staggered beneath his cousin's heavy hand, so that the match which he had lighted went out, and left the two standing in a darkness through which already feeble threads of grey morning light were beginning to steal.

"Hands off! Are you mad?" Trevor asked savagely. "Why should I not take them as well as you? Do you want them all?"

"No; I want none of them, neither do you." And, as he spoke, Noel shook the blankets he had worn

from his shoulders with a shudder as if they burned his flesh.

"Thank God, I am free from them!" he muttered; but, though the blankets slid down upon the floor and slowly settled into a tumbled heap, little shreds of their wool clung to him.

He was not quite free from them yet.

"But you have used them, and kept warm in them. Why should not I use them too?" asked Trevor.

"Because I have sworn to save your life, and will, Trevor, ay, in spite of you. It is your duty to live; for me it does not matter."

"I don't see the difference; but if you take so much interest in my life, you had better let me keep the blankets. I am freezing. Why do you object?"

"Do you see whose blankets they are?"

"They were that dead thing's, I suppose. But what then? He doesn't want them any more, and I do."

"Do you know how that 'dead thing' died?" asked Noel.

"No; nor care."

"You might if you knew. A fortnight ago he

died of small-pox, and those, pointing to the wraps which Trevor had dropped, are his blankets. Do you understand?"

Trevor started, and for a moment was silent with horror; but he recovered himself immediately.

"How can you know that? You have never dared to raise that," and his voice vibrated with loathing as he pointed to the dead man's cowl.

"No; I had no need to," Noel answered. "I know what it hides without looking. That thing was Tintinamous Quist, the Cree chief, a fortnight ago, and he died of small-pox. The police knew all about it at Maple Creek when I was there."

"And yet you slept in his blankets!"

"Yes, I slept in them. My life is my own. Yours belongs to—others."

His lips even then were loath to divulge his secret, but at last a light broke upon Trevor.

"My God!" he cried, "and you did this for *her*! I have been wrapped in your clothes and you in *his* for her sake! Oh, Pussy, Pussy, what a mistake you have made!" and Trevor covered his face with his hands.

"Nonsense, man; don't be a fool!" said Noel,

roughly. "Pussy has made no mistake, and there is no harm done. I took a bit of risk, and slept well in consequence. You had to freeze all night; and, after all, most likely Tintinamous never wore them. At any rate, it's done now, so come outside; we have seen enough of that thing," and as he spoke he pushed open the door of the teepee, and in doing so must have rasped against the frozen hide with his shoulder.

That, at any rate, would account for the strange noise they heard, and yet such tricks does sound play with heated imaginations, that to both men it sounded like a grim chuckle, and both turned simultaneously to look at the cowed figure by the hearth.

"My God, he's laughing at us!" cried Trevor, with a shudder.

"We'll stop his laughing," Noel muttered, with an oath, and, gathering up the dead embers and all the odds and ends of unburnt chips, he piled them and the blankets against the wall of the hut, and set fire to the pile. But it was no easy matter to burn the teepee. The hide of which its walls were made was thick.

The red man's home of tanned hide will outlast

some of our jerry-builders' villas, and this teepee had stood for at least fifty scorching Indian summers, until all grease and animal matter had been dried out of it. Besides, the snow lay upon it in places in spite of the sharp slope of the walls, and kept the flames at bay. But at last they made good their hold, and began to eat into the pictured histories of Cree life, painted with no little skill upon the *outside* of his house—fights and buffalo hunts and canoe-trips. If you can judge of a race by its art, love plays a small part in the redskin's life. It is unrepresented in his picture-galleries.

"Come," said Noel, when he saw his work was done, turning once more in the grey dawn towards the north, where the great line lay, "one more effort. The fight is never lost until the end of the last round, and there are two chances in our favour to-day."

"How two?" asked Trevor, following him.

"We may reach the Canadian Pacific Railway or we may be rescued by the men from Maple Creek. If Maple Creek is anywhere near here, they should see the fire."

"And what then?"

"Leave that to me, Trevor. I don't think they can have heard of the stage robbery at Maple Creek ; and if they have, I think I can fix it. They would hardly care to hold men who have the small-pox."

During the night the wind had dropped, the sky had never a cloud in it, and the first rays of the sun sparkled from a blinding sheet of new-fallen snow. No doubt the thermometer still registered something very terrible in cold, but there was no wind to bring it home to them, to drive it into their hearts and down their throats. And it was well for them that there was no wind ; for, in spite of the change in their favour, they had both become so feeble, that they could scarcely make as good progress now, over the crisp, hard frozen crust in bright sunlight, with no wind to buffet them, no drifting snow to blind them, as they had made the day before in the darkness of the storm.

At the first pause for breath—and they paused soon, be sure—they turned and, looking back, watched the flames leaping above the peak of the teepee : they saw its walls split, and saw even in its lurid interior the Cree chief still sitting, though the red

sparks poured round him as thick as summer rain. When they looked again the walls had fallen in, and the flames had died down. The teepee had gone, but either their eyes mocked them, or else there still sat that cowered figure, its head bowed, its hands clenched round its knees, still watching, still waiting by its ruined hearth.

The strength of starving men soon ebbs, and before they had been walking half an hour, Noel realized that his cousin was "played out." By nine, Trevor could not walk a couple of hundred yards without stopping; by half-past, he was leaning heavily on his cousin's arm, and Noel himself felt, every time he raised his foot, as if a fifty-pound weight was attached to it. And still the prairie stretched on into apparently infinite distance, unbroken, interminable. It seemed useless to go on struggling. The horizon came no nearer, and there was no other goal to make for; so that, when at last Trevor fell and refused to rise again, Noel too felt that he might as well lie down beside him, and finish his troubles there.

"It's all up, Noel," Trevor moaned from the snow; "I can't go another yard. My legs won't obey my

will any more ; I can't *shove* one foot in front of the other."

But Noel made no answer.

"You have done all that a man could do, old fellow," Trevor continued, "and I've been a cur to let you stay by me so long. Now go and save yourself. You can't save me."

But still Noel made no answer, nor any sign of leaving him, but stood shading his eyes from the glare of the sun, and staring intently at the skyline before him. But he could not see clearly, for the sun on the snow dazzled him ; and, besides, his knees were now so weak that he swayed as he stood. He, too, was almost too weak to stand.

"Get on to your knees, Trevor," he said hastily, "and look, if you can, over there to the north-west. Those are not coyotes, are they ? They look too large, but there is something wrong with my eyes this morning. I can't see clearly."

With Noel's help, Trevor raised himself, and strained his eyes to make out the two objects which had arrested his cousin's attention.

"Coyotes or wolves," he muttered, sinking back again : "it doesn't much matter, does it ? I suppose

the brutes will have the decency to wait until we are dead ; and if they don't, we can't help it."

"They are neither coyotes nor wolves," insisted Noel, still gazing at them eagerly. "They are too big for coyotes, and they don't *slink* like wolves. Great Heaven, if I could only see clearly for one moment ! Look again, Trevor. What is that behind them coming over the ridge ? Surely it is a man on horseback !"

But Trevor was past caring, and would not raise himself again. "It may be," he said ; "but if it were, he would not see us. He is too far off, and luck is against us. Why worry any more ?"

But hope had given the younger man fresh strength, and his eyes never left the three objects which came slowly towards them, until a deep note came to him booming over the snow. Again and again it came, that rich music which Englishmen love so well. There is nothing like it in the world, the note of the hunting hound.

Dead-beat, walked to a standstill, starving as he was, that music sent Noel's life-blood leaping through his veins again, and a faint flush of colour came to his haggard cheek. "Do you hear it, Trevor, our own

Berkshire music? It is Stobart! and those great hounds of his! We are saved my boy, saved!"

It was as Noel said.

In front, coming straight towards them over the snow, was a swift grey thing running for dear life; behind it, fully extended, were two giant hounds running savagely for blood; and toiling far behind the hounds was the horseman to whom they belonged.

Once the coyote passed behind a hummock of snow, and for a moment the hounds checked. They were running by sight, and not by scent. But the coyote showed himself again, and in a second his pursuers saw him, and dashed after him with a cry which must have raised every bristle on the poor little vagrant's back. On the flat, with no snow on the ground, a fast horse will run up to an ordinary coyote in a half-mile spin, if the horse starts on anything like fair terms with him; but in the deep snow the sergeant's horse had no chance at all, and even the hounds laboured at a disadvantage. The coyote's light frame seemed to skim the snow and pass over it like the shadow of a flying cloud; but the hounds broke the crust, and it was a good mile before their

strength told, their powerful jaws closed across his spine, and hounds and coyote rolled over and over, a confused mass in a flurry of scattered snow.

Noel had stood spellbound, watching the chase; but now, when the hounds killed within half a mile of him, he put his finger in his ear in old-country fashion, and let out such a yell as startled the silent prairie.

In Berkshire, where men are lusty, and starvation unknown, that yell might not have reflected much credit on the man who emitted it; but in the Cypress Hills, coming from the throat of so weary a man, it was a wonderful effort. And it answered its purpose, for the sergeant looked up, and saw for the first time the two figures ahead of him. When his hounds were running, Stobart would have ridden past the colonel of his own regiment without seeing him. The sergeant saw them, but the sergeant was a deliberate man. If the figures he saw wanted him, they could wait. They had probably waited some time already. Well! they could go on waiting. His hounds would not, and, being a reasonable sportsman, he did not expect them to; so he quietly dismounted, and performed

that grey vagabond's obsequies properly and in order, and not until he had transferred the coyote's brush from the place for which nature had designed it to his own saddle-bow, not until he had broken up the quarry and caressed and rewarded his favourites, did he come riding towards the cousins.

As he came up he recognized Noel.

"Great Scott, Johns! is that you? What in thunder have you been doing to yourself? and who is that at your feet?"

"Give me some whisky, and I'll tell you," Noel managed to say. His strength was leaving him again, now that the excitement had passed. "No! throw me the flask," he added, as Stobart came alongside. "You mustn't come too close to us. Keep back."

"What do you mean?" asked the sergeant. "Are you off your head?" But he threw him the flask.

Before answering him, Noel put the flask to Trevor's lips, thanking Providence that whisky was no longer prohibited in the North-West Territory. In old days a moderate man like Stobart dared not have taken the generous fluid about with him in such open fashion, although more of it probably was

drunk then than now, men laying in a stock, camel fashion, whenever they got a chance. When he had put new life into his cousin and himself, he turned to his friend. "No, sergeant, I'm not crazed, but starving; and, what is worse, we slept last night in old Tintinamous' dead tent."

"What? He died of small-pox!"

"I know. That is why I don't want you to come any nearer: and that is one reason why I am not going to return your flask," he added, with a ghost of a smile.

"Keep it, boy; keep it!" the generous fellow cried.

"But say! that is bad about the tent. Didn't you know about it?"

"Not until we were inside, and, even if we had, we could not well have helped going in. It was death in the blizzard or a chance of small-pox in the teepee."

"A chance! Well, it can't be helped. I've got a shack of my own, and all the boys are away hunting those fellows from Ophir. You can go into my shack, and, if anything happens, I can look after you. I've had it."

And so it was arranged, the sergeant turning

himself into a sick-nurse, and his hut into a small-pox ward, without a murmur, for comparative strangers, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Verily, the warm human hearts are not all in the great cities.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLOT.

DEAD stillness hung round Battle Creek: the stillness of the depth of winter in the North West. Nearly a week had passed since the cousins had been brought into the station riding on Stobart's sorrel, whilst he plodded through the snow in front of them, and none of the other men, stationed at the post, had as yet returned from their hunt after the men from Ophir. True to his promise, Stobart had housed Noel and Trevor in his own shack, and watched over them until Noel began to sicken. Then he insisted upon Trevor's removal to other quarters, and tried to persuade him to leave the nursing in his hands. But to this Trevor would not consent. It was little enough he could do for the man who had risked all to save him, but that he

would do. As for Noel, the shadow of the Cree tent was upon him; the shreds of the Cree's blanket still clung to him; a presentiment possessed him which no reasoning could shake. There is an instinct which warns men of death, as it warns dumb animals, and this instinct was warning Noel Johns. For a day or two he tried to persuade himself that languor and the vague "malaise" which possessed him were nothing more than mere weariness, but the weariness grew instead of lessening, and pain, which he tried to conceal in his waking hours, took possession of him. In the night his sleep was broken by dreams, and always in his dreams he went back to the Cree tent. Trevor, who slept by his bedside, heard him talking in his sleep night after night, and by degrees learnt the drift of his dreams. He was gambling in the dead-tent with that cowed figure in the shadow for some undefined stake, and the play always ended in the same way, the poor lad's hand moving as if he were throwing down a pack of cards, and his lips muttered, "In six days' time, at sundown." Trevor had been telling Stobart of these dreams, as the two sat outside the hut on the wood pile, when the sergeant put down his pipe with the

air of a man who had made up his mind that it was time to act, and said shortly—

"It is no good to shut our eyes any longer, Trevor. He has got that cursed thing, and there is only one chance, if we mean to save him."

"What chance?" replied the other. "What can we do here?" and he looked bitterly out over the endless waste of snow. "It seems to me that in this cursed country a man must die like a dog for want of help."

"That's so most times. Pioneers and such-like live alone, and die alone when their time comes. The men of the 'broken brigade' have got to be at the front, and you can't have surgeons and ambulance-waggons there all the time. But there *is* a doctor not such a great way off, as it happens."

"A doctor! Where? Why the devil did you never say anything about him before?"

"Time enough now," replied the sergeant. "I'm not so sure that the journey won't do him more harm than the doctor can do him good. But we may as well try: he'll die here, anyway."

"Where is this doctor?" asked Trevor. "And who is he?"

"Clennel, the C. P. R. man, and I guess he is staying at Brown's, just beyond Forres. At least, that is where he stays most of the time when he is around this section of the country."

"How far is it to Brown's?"

"Well, it's thirty, or nearly thirty, miles to the line, and Brown's is nearly a mile beyond the line."

"Thirty-one miles, and in this cold! Could he live through it?" asked Trevor.

"God knows! I guess not; but it's his only chance," replied Stobart. "He has got the notion set in his head that he has to meet that dead Cree at sundown to-morrow; and if we let him stay here thinking about it, he'll meet him as sure as the sun sets. I've known men take notions of that kind before."

"Then we must risk it. But will he come?"

"He would but for one thing," replied Stobart, "if it was only for the chance of dying in the open, instead of in that room."

"And what is that one thing?" asked Trevor.

"You——"

"Me! What do you mean? I want him to go."

"I know, and it's not your fault. But don't you know why Noel watches that trail to Farwell all day long? Don't you know why he counts the hours between this and sundown to-morrow?"

"I didn't know he did."

"Like enough. He wouldn't let you see if he could help it; he's pretty sly, is Noel. This is the way he has put it up. At sundown to-morrow he has to send in his chips, and square up with the Cree (Lord knows why, but he's crazed, so that don't matter); and if none of the police come along before he dies, he means to stay here as Trevor Johns, while you get out of the country as Noel. You are like enough to one another, to make his scheme work; *but you* might be seized at Brown's."

"And I am to buy my freedom with my cousin's life! You must have a good opinion of Trevor Johns."

"Better than I had," answered the sergeant, not unkindly; "and if Noel dies it would be robbing him not to take the freedom he has bought for you. But I'm going to take a hand in this game, and make it a bit fairer all round. It's my duty to give you up, isn't it?"

"The sooner the better," replied Trevor, sadly.

"That's so; and if you'd *robbed* the stage, I would have had you at Maple Creek before this. As it is, I don't know that it much matters; and if Noel will make an effort to save himself, I'll give you a chance. The men at Brown's don't know either of you, and if you like to swap names before starting from here that is no concern of mine, unless Noel recovers. If he dies, you are Noel Johns, and can go where the hell you please; if he lives, you are Trevor Johns, who held the stage, and must stay right here. How does that strike you?"

"I'll do my part, if Noel will do his," replied Trevor, after a pause. "Come and persuade him."

They found Noel, as the sergeant had said, with his eyes fixed on the miserable little window, looking out on the Farwell trail.

As they entered, he turned to them and asked—

"Well, boys, what time is it?"

"About four," Stobart replied, with a quick glance at Trevor. "The sun will be down in another half-hour. It sets early now."

"As early as that, does it?" he asked, and as he turned over on his side, they heard him mutter, "At

four-thirty to-morrow; I wonder what time that is at home?"

"We want to take you to Forres to-morrow, Noel," Stobart blurted out. "It seems to us you are pretty sick, and we want you to see a doctor."

Noel half turned to them again. "A doctor?" he asked. "Is there a doctor at Forres?"

"There should be, and we want you to see him. Will you come?"

"What is the good, old chap? No doctor could cure me."

"That is what we don't know," replied Stobart; "and anyhow, we thought you would be quieter there than here. I'm expecting some of the boys along to-morrow."

"Some of the boys!" Noel exclaimed, sitting up excitedly, and glancing at the window again.

"Who? Some of those from Farwell or East End, I expect. It's time some of them were around."

Noel thought for a moment, and then turning to Trevor, asked him if he would mind leaving him and the sergeant alone together for a few moments. "It's just a matter of business, old fellow, so you won't mind," he added, as Trevor went out.

When they were alone he lay for some moments apparently lost in thought.

"You have been a bit of a woodsman in your time," he said at length to Stobart, who stood near. "Did you ever see a fool-hen with her chicks in early summer?"

Stobart thought he was wandering again, but humoured him. "Yes, lad, I have, many times."

"The Siwashes on the coast used to kill the poor beggars whilst they were fussing after their chicks. That is hard enough, but it's worse when they kill the chicks too."

"The brutes would kill anything. A Siwash has no pity."

"But a white should have. Stobart, are you going to give up Trevor when I'm dead? Won't one of us satisfy the law?"

Then Stobart understood him and spoke out.

"Look here, Johns, this is all tom-rot about your dying, and I've got my duty to perform; but I am a white man, and I'll make a deal with you. If you will try to get to Forres to-morrow, I'll give Trevor a chance. You and he can change names, and if you should die, the one who calls himself

Noel Johns can quit the country. I'll shut my mouth. But if you get well, Trevor has sworn to give himself up, and I'll see that he does so."

"He won't want much forcing, poor old chap!" replied Noel; "but I'll accept your terms. If I live after sundown to-morrow, you can do what you like with Trevor. When will you start?"

"As soon as it is light enough," Stobart answered; "we have a long way to go."

"Shall we make Forres by sundown?"

"Not by a jug-ful," was the enigmatical reply. And so the matter was settled, and Noel turned again on his pillow, to wonder what Pussy and the old man would be doing at four-thirty to-morrow.

If they were sure not to reach Forres before sundown, there need be very little risk of Trevor's detection.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRYST AT SUNDOWN.

"DID you put his watch on last night?"

"Yes; just an hour, as we agreed."

"And are you sure he didn't know about it?"

"Sure. He was fast asleep when I altered it."

"That's good. Then I think we'll make him miss his appointment with old Tintinamous. We had better go and wake him now."

The speakers were Stobart and Trevor, and the time early morning on the sixth day.

When they entered Noel's room. they found him already wide awake, watching the grey light steal over the snow.

"You're early, Stobart," he said; "the sun is not up yet."

"I guess he is," the other answered; "but he can't

make himself seen through the clouds. It's a grey day. What time do you make it by your watch? Mine has stopped."

Noel put his hand under his pillow, and brought out his watch. "By Jove! you are right. Why, man, it's eight o'clock."

"Yes, it's late, I know; but we'll make Forres fairly early to-night. Lean on me, and we'll pack you into the sleigh."

Noel obeyed, and in another ten minutes the party was ready to start, the sergeant and Trevor occupying the front seat, while the sick man, swathed in rugs, was securely lashed in behind. The best horses on the station were harnessed to the sleigh; the thickest robes which the force possessed were piled upon Noel to protect him from the bitter wind, though every robe he touched would have to be destroyed; the broad shoulders of his two friends gave him some shelter, and yet he shuddered in the midst of his robes. The full bitterness of the winter had settled down on the plains of Assineboia, and the country looked as cheerless and forbidding as a new gravestone.

There was not a vestige of life anywhere; not an

antelope, or the track of one, to break the snow's monotony; not a wing to vary the dead grey of the sky; nothing, except on a far skyline the slouching figure of a huge wolf, his quarters carried low, his tail brushing the snow, his whole outline as gaunt and ghoul-like as even the imagination of a Doré could have made it.

"I expect those grey devils are starving about now," muttered Stobart, his eyes resting on the wolf. "I never knew deer and antelope so scarce before, and it's a bad rabbit year too."

"I wonder where he got his last meal?" said Trevor, without thinking, and immediately there rose before his mind's eye the picture of a lonely figure crouching over the ruins of its home. It was almost as if some one had answered his thought, and Trevor started nervously, and hoped that the same idea might not occur to his cousin. But Noel made no sign.

"The Indians up north tell you that those big grey wolves are the spirits of their dead," said Stobart, after a pause. "If they are, I don't think much of their happy hunting-grounds. I'd rather be a dead Cree than a live wolf, to-day," he added,

and drew his robes closer round him with his disengaged hand.

Trevor kicked the speaker as well as he was able to, but his legs were hampered in his robes, and Stobart was slow to take a hint, so the words were spoken; and though Noel said nothing at the time, his eyes never left the gaunt figure on the skyline, until it slunk over a rise and was lost to sight.

After such an unfortunate commencement, it was hardly to be wondered at that the conversation flagged. Men talk very little on these long winter drives, and Noel seemed to be faint and drowsy, whilst the lips of the two in front were sealed by the bitter wind which met them.

The sleigh swept on silently over the white waste, the grey sky grew darker and more sullen, and only once, towards noon, was there a faint gleam in the clouds overhead which might have betokened the presence of the sun.

When the other two noticed this, Noel was, as far as they could judge, fast asleep, his head hanging heavily, and rolling with every lurch of the sleigh.

Everything was going well with the conspirators.

At three the clouds were so heavy that another

snowfall seemed imminent, but it held off hour after hour, whilst the wind kept piling up the grey banks in the heavens, ever thicker and thicker, until there was a shadow like the shadow of coming night upon the snow.

"Look at your watch, and see what the time is," Stobart whispered at last to Trevor, and he, obeying him, drew out an old silver "hunter" from his pocket, and glancing at it whispered—

"Five by me, four in reality."

"If the sun doesn't show up in another half-hour he won't show up at all," muttered Stobart, "and even if Noel does wake up now, it don't much matter: no man could tell that his watch was lying to-day."

"Have we much further to go?" asked Trevor. "He lies there as if he was dead already."

"Not more than a couple of miles or so, after we reach that next bluff. You can see the telegraph-poles along the line, from the other side of it."

This was encouraging; but in spite of the horses' speed the time dragged heavily. Noel's torpor astonished his companions. Hitherto he had been full of nervous fears for Trevor's safety, excitable, at

times almost delirious; now he lay there like one dead, and even when they convinced themselves that he still lived, they could not shake off the gloom which oppressed them.

"A day like this would give any one the blues," growled Stobart, savagely. But dreary as the day was, he knew that it was not the dreariness of the day which oppressed his spirits.

There was something more than that; an indefinable dread which hung over them, a terror following them from which they could not escape.

They had deceived Noel; themselves they could not deceive; and the ghastly presentiment at which they had laughed now invaded their own minds. Though the sun was invisible, and though they dared not have admitted the fact to each other, they were both of them watching for sundown, watching for it long after their timepieces told them that the hour of it was past.

"Where is the sun now?"

It was as if a voice had put the thought of their hearts into words, and both men started nervously; but Trevor pulled himself together and answered Noel bravely—

"What! are you awake at last, Noel?"

"Yes, awake, wide awake and waiting. Where is the sun?"

"Set this half-hour."

"Set? set? Isn't this the sixth day?"

"The sixth or the seventh. What matters?"

"But I had to meet——" Noel began in a dazed way, passing his hand hopelessly across his forehead.

"You had to meet Dr. Clennel, at Brown's, in half an hour's time," broke in Stobart, cheerily; "and so you shall, boy, and he'll have you on the train for the old country in a fortnight, and Trevor too." But though he spoke so confidently, the sergeant kept looking anxiously at the grey clouds to the west.

"There are the poles, Noel," he cried a moment later; "and there is the line which takes Englishmen home. One more effort, and you are both saved."

As he spoke a long, low moaning wail came from the gloom behind the sleigh, which gathered strength and grew into a hideous longdrawn howl, and then died away again in the distance.

Again it came from some remote part of the prairie, making the lonely lands shudder with the misery and savagery of its music!

"*The dead Crees are hunting,*" whispered Noel, hoarsely, and there was a horror in his voice, which chilled the others more than the prairie wind.

"The wolves are running a deer, or howling for want of one," retorted Stobart, angrily lashing his horses. "They are generally on the move about nightfall."

Right ahead of them now the men could see the light of Brown's shack, standing out like a beacon in the snowy waste, and the horses seemed to recognize it as a haven of safety, and strain every muscle to reach it. They knew what the howl of the wolves meant to them and their kind, for they had heard it many a night, when picketed too far from the dying embers of a camp-fire, or when left in small bands in the hills where they were bred. But though the horses laid back their ears and galloped for their lives, the howling came nearer and nearer. If the wolves were running a deer, the deer was following directly in the wake of Stobart's sleigh.

"Here they come! Two, three, five of them! *Tintinamous' leading,*" cried Noel, hoarsely, rising in his seat and struggling to throw off his wraps,

as five long shadows swept over the rise behind them.

"For God's sake hold him down, Trevor! hold him down!" yelled Stobart, standing up, and lashing his horses madly. "He is clean mad, and we are all but there. Those brutes can never be hunting us."

But they were, and the horses knew it, and the sick man knew it, and struggled to throw himself out to meet them, while the band of swift shadows grew and grew, and crept closer and closer at every stride.

In five minutes the foremost of them was racing alongside the sleigh; and though Trevor emptied his six-shooter amongst them, the wolves took no notice of the little red spurts of flame, or the hissing bullets, which kicked up the snow under their bellies. Trevor dared not loosen his grip upon his cousin, and the pace at which they were travelling made the sleigh rock beneath him, so that it was small wonder if he made bad shooting. But when the wolves neither stopped nor swerved, a hideous doubt entered even into his sane mind. "Were these grey devils nothing but prairie wolves? Had not the prairie, indeed, spewed up its dead?"

Some one, he remembered, had told him long ago that the American grey wolf, big as he is, never molests men ; that he never hunts in packs, as the Russian wolves do ; and yet these gaunt brutes (there seemed to be twenty or thirty of them now) were leaping at the horses' throats, and snatching at the very rugs in which the men were wrapped.

Their gleaming eyes flashed greedily in the dusk on every side, the strong musky stench of their bodies fouled the air ; and though they were running mute now for blood, the sobbing of the frantic horses, and the clashing of the wolves' white fangs, sent a terrible message to the men's brains.

And yet there was the light of Brown's shack only just ahead of them. Surely they could reach it in time. He had just lighted his lamps, and in another five minutes they would all be safe in the glow of them. Even now they were passing under the wires which, in a few seconds, could carry a cry for help to those dear old friends at Kingdon !

At that moment there was a sudden shock, and the sleigh stopped dead. One of the horses had stumbled and fallen over the hidden rails, and in less time than it takes to write it the wolves swooped

down on their prey, and each man was fighting for his life.

Even then, with his fingers buried in the coarse grey bristles of the brute at his throat, Trevor saw a tall figure dash to the side of the fallen horse, saw the wolves give back for a moment, and saw the gleam of steel in the gloom. The next moment a sudden jerk threw him back upon the seat, the horses made a wild plunge forward, and the sleigh whirled over the snow at a madder pace than ever.

There were only three horses now. The near leader was gone. Some one had cut the harness which held him, and he lay where he fell, his life-blood dabbling the grey muzzles of those prairie fiends.

"Where is Noel?"

There was no one to speak, and yet Trevor heard the words as distinctly as if they had been shouted into his ear, and turning he saw that the back seat was empty.

"Noel!" he cried. "Stobart, stop! My God, where is Noel?"

But Stobart could not stop. The horses were

beyond any human power to stop them. To control such panic as theirs the sergeant's strong arms were as useless as an infant's.

Without pausing to calculate the danger, Trevor sprang from the sleigh, and rolled headlong in the snow.

The snow broke his fall, and half blinded and dizzy though he was, he yet regained his feet and ran wildly back toward the line.

But he was too late. Before he could gain his side, he saw his cousin make his last stand against fate.

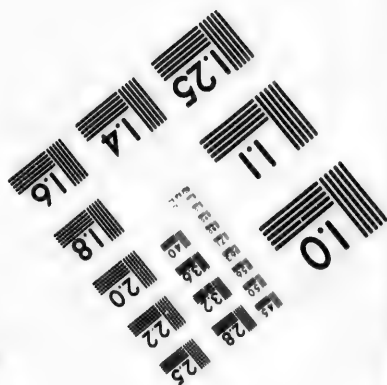
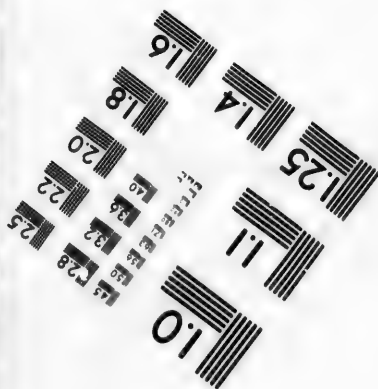
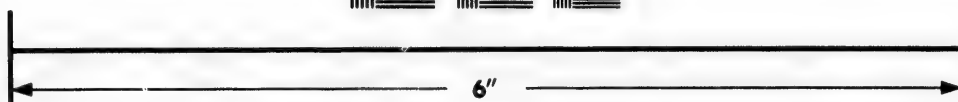
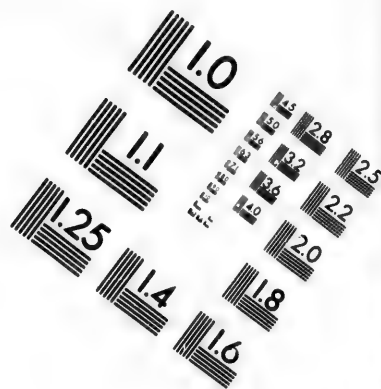
The hounds of hell were round him on every side, but his tall figure towered above them still. Perhaps the madman's frenzy helped him, perhaps he was sane again, but for the old Berserk madness which lurks still in every Englishman's blood.

But he was fighting with empty hands against fangs and claws, and such a fight could not last long.

Once Trevor saw him swing a huge brute clear above his head, and dash him down with a dull thud amongst his fellows.

And then a weird scream sounded in the west,





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a long vibrating shriek, such as that with which Irish peasants tell that the banshee heralds death.

The fight for life was taking place right between the rails of Canada's iron road, and coming down it, hurrying eastward, was a huge eye of fire.

The wolves saw it and fled, vanished like spectres at cock-crow—all but one gigantic brute, who flew at Noel's throat, and stood there wrestling with him, face to face, and chest to chest.

Trevor was almost up to them now, but they took no heed of his coming. He tried to cry out, but his voice stuck in his throat. It was like a nightmare; the two were unconscious of aught except of each other, swaying backwards and forwards in the grey light, the man's hands gripping at the wolf's throat, and the brute's hoary muzzle pressing closer and closer to the man, whilst its claws tore the shirt from his chest in ribbons.

And, meanwhile, a red light was creeping along the rails, and the thunder of wheels drew nearer; there was the clank and clang of steel against steel, a blaze of fire, a bevy of dancing sparks, a long plume of smoke floating away across the snow, a fleeting picture of bright faces at the windows safe

from the snow and the storm. And the eastward-bound express went by.

As the roar of it died away in the distance, there was a dull red glow low down in the west. What they had been looking for had come at last, in spite of the lying timepieces. The sun of the sixth day had set, and Stobart and Trevor Johns were bending over all that remained of the man who left Kingdon to make his pile in America.

But the carcass of that great grey wolf they never found. Probably the cow-catcher of the train, which passed over Noel, caught his enemy and flung its body into some snowdrift hundreds of yards away; or perhaps—but no. This is the nineteenth century, and we have done with superstitions and all childish things.

"Well, lad, he died fighting like a man in the open, and I guess that's just how he would have wanted to die," said the sergeant, as he laid the body tenderly upon the sleigh, which the men from Brown's had now brought up.

"And for the sake of the woman he loved," added Trevor, "may God rest his gallant soul!"

POSTSCRIPT.

THERE is little to add. Men inured to hardships, and living face to face with nature, know how to appreciate courage and self-devotion. Sergeant Stobart lied to his comrades, a little for form's sake ; but he had no need to. It leaked out, perhaps, somehow that the dead man was Noel Johns, but they wrote Trevor Johns on the simple little cross which marks his last resting-place, and curious passengers, who see that lonely cross from the windows of their Pullman car, are told that it is the grave of the road-agent who held up the Pinto coach in 188—. But when he had outlived all danger of carrying on the red man's curse to other countries, the men at Brown's put a passenger on the east-bound train whom they called Noel Johns.

It is true that in England, down at Kingdon-on-the-Thames, there is still a Mr. Trevor Johns, of

Cowley. But what matter? Perhaps he took his cousin's name, to keep his memory green in the old place; but it is odd that even now, if you could look into the dim sweet graveyard by the river, you would see an old greyhaired man, and a fair type of English womanhood, bending over a marble tablet, beneath a wreath of rose bushes, on which there is a somewhat unusual carving—the figure of a bird, running towards you, its wings spread, its feathers ruffled, its beak open.

There must be some mistake, for the bird is not any English bird we know, and yet so well carved that we can hardly think that the sculptor's incompetence is to blame for its strangeness in our eyes.

Underneath is written a simple legend: "He died for others."

As the girl and the old man turn away to the dark river, where the trout are rising madly at the white moth, the old man mutters something which sounds like a line from Kipling—

"Follow after, follow after, for the harvest is sown.

By the stones about the wayside ye shall come to your own."

THE END.

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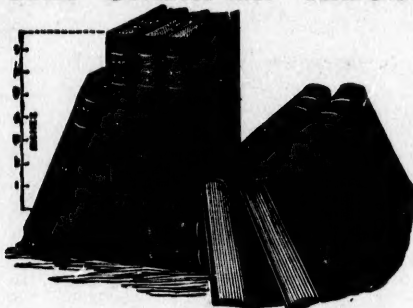
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